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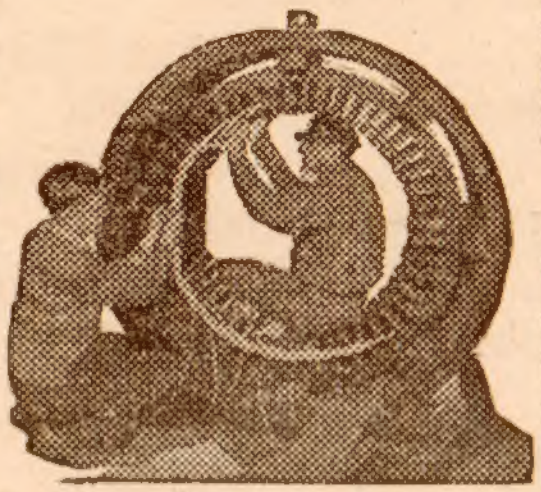

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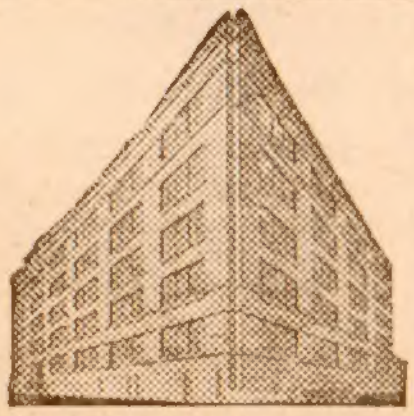

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THRILLING WESTERN

Vol. VI, No. 3 | G. B. FARNUM, *Editor* | September, 1935

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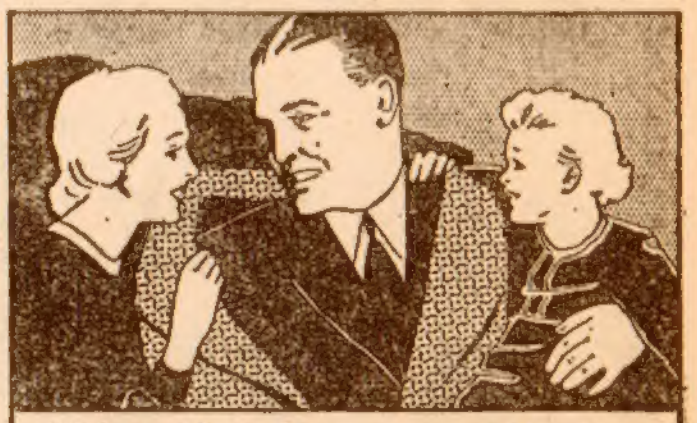

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Limit your request to 25 words. No goods for sale listed, nor requests concerning firearms or any illegal articles.

Type or hand-print clearly, in submitting announcements. THRILLING WESTERN will not be responsible for losses sustained. Make very plain just what you have and what you want to "swap" it for. Enclose a clipping of this announcement with your request.

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Have two tube Crosley battery radio with earphones. Good condition. Will swap for telescope or field glasses. Must be six power or more. Thomas Martzahn, Jr., 1606 W. Locust Street, Davenport, Iowa.

Have foreign stamps, U. S. meters and permits. Send 100 or more foreign stamps and receive same number from me. Trade License plates for stamps. W. H. Oliver, Bottineau, N. D.

Have ventriloquism book and others, coins, stamps, clippings. Want Indian head pennies and Liberty head nickels, or? F. Hartley, 1512 Tibbits Avenue, Troy, N. Y.

Will swap a five string banjo in good shape for a motorcycle, 74 or 45 twin, no older than 1925 model. Virgil Triplet, Maple Lake, Minnesota.

Have 3 acres of wooded lake shore in Minnesota. Want 2 motorcycles not later than 1930 models. Budd Randers, 305 Minnesota Street, Crookston, Minn.

What have you to exchange for a 4 x 5 Premo photo camera? It comes with case, plate holder, filmpack adapter and instruction book. R. F. Kittredge, Box 1065, Madison, Maine.

Will swap woodworking outfit, bandsaw, circular saw, lathe and motor for a bicycle motor and 4 wheels, 14" x 3" tires. Albert A. Morais, 362 Ames Street, Fall River, Mass.

Will send copy of my hometown newspaper for copy of yours. Edward R. Learned, 606 West "C" Street, Iron Mountain, Michigan.

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Will swap Sebright and Silkie bantam eggs, good stock, for eggs or other breed bantams or transparent and semi-transparent arrowheads. Frank Patterson, Wever, Iowa.

Have motion picture projector, 3,000 feet film, to swap for 12 laying pullets. Guaranteed singer canary for 4 Indian runner ducks. Rudolph Hinrichs, Route 1, Box 219 A, Arlington Heights, Ill.

Will swap cartoon drawn by me for one drawn by you. Ita Gavazzi, P. O. Box 82, Virginia City, Nevada.

Have physical culture encyclopedia, five volumes. Will swap for good electrical books, or course. R. H. Yaryan, Batavia, Arkansas.

Have Remington typewriter, field glasses, cornet, mandolin, violin, camera, coins. Want microscope, coins, stamps, etc. J. Settel, 24 Crosby Avenue, Brooklyn, New York.

Have Indian head penny 1897, 3500 foreign stamps, Italian, Liberian and Dutch coins. What am I offered? Stamps traded. W. R. Andrews, Togo, Sask., Canada.

Want typewriter, or what have you? Have a number or articles, including bicycle. Garth Sprague, Wesley, Maine.

Have 100 western songs and poems. Will trade for more. Have 8 x 10, 4 x 6, 2½ x 3½ size pictures of western Montana. Want good kodak and pictures of other states. Mrs. L. J. Holden, Box 172, Plains, Montana.

Have set of boxing gloves, public speech course, leather leggings. Want stamps and stamp collections. American preferred. Peter Gushberg, 27 Florence St., Manchester, Conn.

Have punching bag outfit, Goldsmith professional catcher's mitt, complete athletic course, new baby microphone. Want bicycle, or what have you? Joseph Soltis, 5318 So. Washtenaw Avenue, Chicago, Ill.

Have match covers to swap for stamps or what have you? William Holter, 1419 Bragg Street, Little Rock, Ark.

Bronze perpetual calendar watch fobs to exchange for motorcycle, encyclopedia, high power microscope, or what offer? O. L. Dodge, Darlington, Mo.

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...writes George Bailey

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. . . or it won't cost you a penny!

Because we have done this for thousands of others...because *we know* we can do as much for you...we dare to make this unconditional offer!

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For 12 years the Weil Belt has been accepted as ideal for reducing by men in all walks of life...from business men and office workers who find that it removes cumbersome fat with every movement . . . to active outdoor men who like the feeling of protection it gives.

DON'T WAIT . . . FAT IS DANGEROUS!

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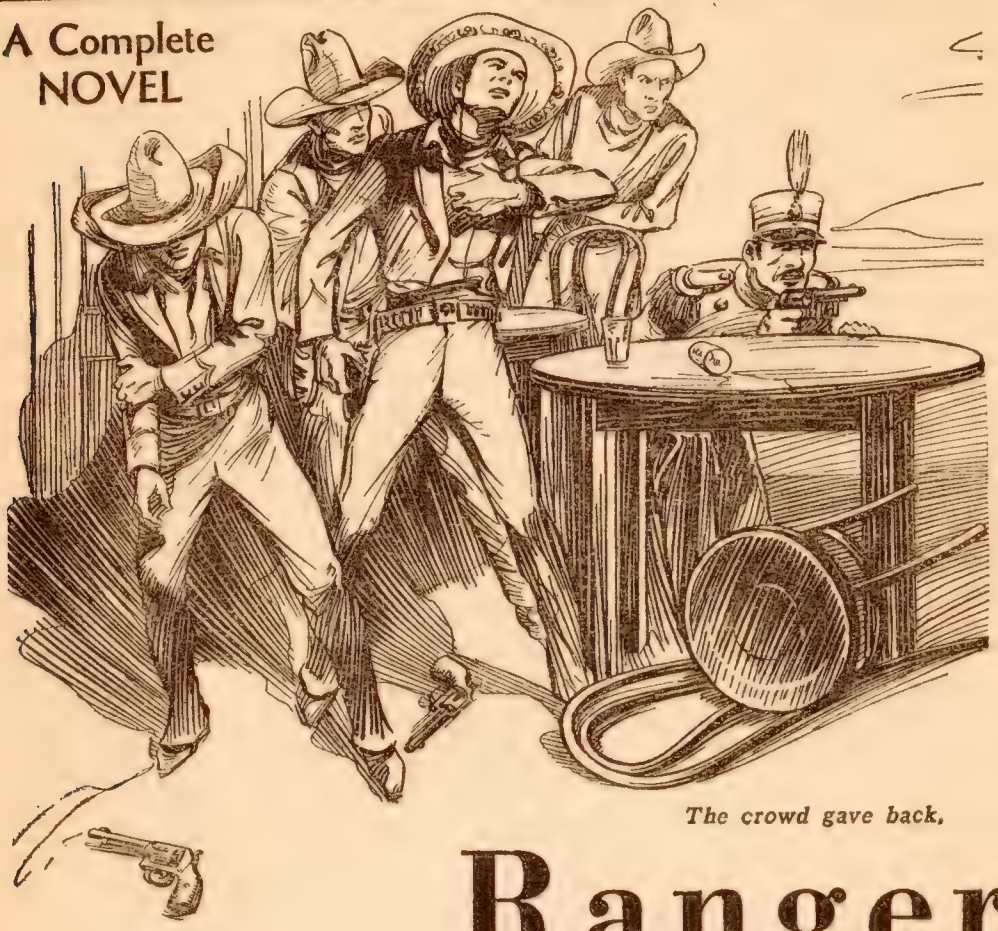
Manuel Cavorca, Border Bandit, is Scheduled

A Complete NOVEL



The crowd gave back,

Ranger

CHAPTER I

Escape

"AND it is the sentence of this court that you be hanged by the neck until you are dead!"

Not a line of Manuel Cavorca's handsome face quivered. The mocking smile that had hovered about his cruel mouth during his trial did not fade. Nothing, it appeared, could shake the iron nerve of the bandit.

"Don't look like a greaser, does he?" whispered a spectator.

"Ain't no Mexican," another whispered back. "American born—old Spanish stock, he—"

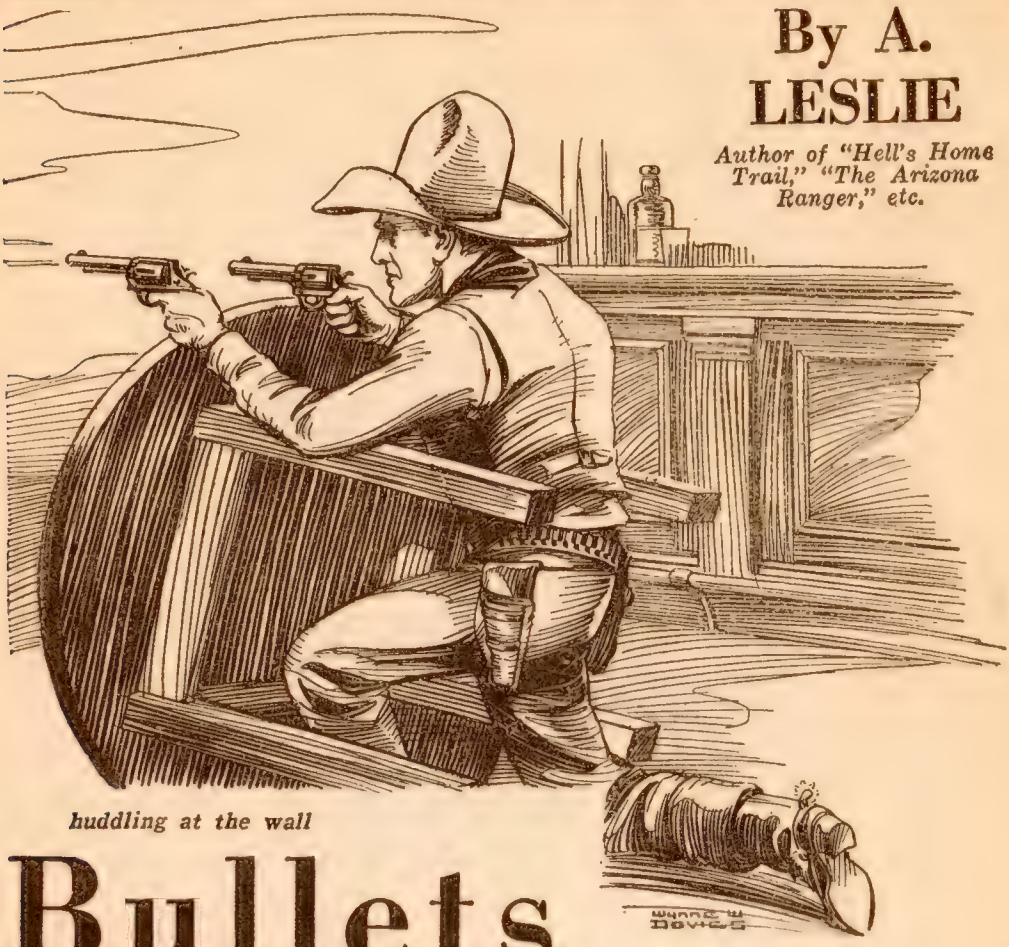
Crash!

A side window flew into a million splinters. The black barrel of a heavy six-gun jutted through the opening, blazing fire and smoke.

The old judge half rose in his chair, then slumped back with a groan, clutching at his shoulder with

Follow Rance Hatfield, Arizona Lawman, on

to Stretch Hemp—but Hits Leather!



By A. LESLIE

Author of "Hell's Home Trail," "The Arizona Ranger," etc.

huddling at the wall

Bullets

reddening fingers. Sheriff Dobson leaped to his feet, tugging at his Colt. A bullet took him squarely between the eyes. Another knocked Deputy Hank Thomas sprawling.

Men surged through the door—dark-faced men with *sombreros* pulled low. They menaced the courtroom crowd with pistols and rifles. A voice rang out:

"Manuel, to me—*pronto!*"

Cavorca went. He kicked the dying deputy aside, jumped over the sheriff's body and lunged for the door. A brawny cattleman leaped from the snarling confusion of the benches and tried to stop him. Cavorca weaved aside. A slim figure in the doorway, masked and *seraped,* snapped a shot past him and the ranch owner went down. Cavorca hurdled the twitching form and reached the door.

"This way," shrilled the masked voice—a woman's voice. "Horses, Manuel!"

the Smoky Trail of Owl-Hoot Hombres!

Manuel Cavorca

Cavorca and the masked girl vanished. The courtroom seemed to explode with the reports of six-shooters. Ranch owners and cowboys fought themselves free from the milling mob of town loafers and courtroom hangers-on and were shooting it out with the dark-faced bandits.

One went down, drilled dead center. Another cursed at the doorway, his gun arm swinging limp. His companions, crouching low over their smoking sixes, back-stepped after him. Outside sounded a clatter of swift hoofs.

Arizona Ranger Rance Hatfield wasn't in the courtroom when sentence was pronounced. He was at a nearby restaurant surrounding a husky portion of pig's-hip and hen-fruit.

Gen. Tomaso Fuentes

"I roped myself enough hell droppin' my loop on that jigger, 'thout listenin' to the jedge 'splain to him he's gotta do a dance on nothin'," Rance told himself. "I never did fancy hearin' that kinda— Sufferin' sandtoads!"

CHAIR and table went over as the Ranger leaped for the door. He hurled the squalling Chinese hash-slinger aside and reached the street, guns sliding from their sheaths.

Yells, screeches, the crackle of pistol shots, and blue smoke boiled from the courthouse, two blocks down the street. Horses were plunging and snorting in front of the building, shadowy and distorted in the gathering dusk.

Like pips from a squeezed orange, two figures shot from the courthouse door. They flung themselves into saddles, wheeled their frantic horses and streaked it down the street.

Rance Hatfield's guns let go with a rattling crash. One of the fleeing figures was bareheaded and Rance caught the glint of hair golden as sunlight in a lily's cup.

"That sidewinder! He's loose again!" gritted the Ranger, firing as fast as he could pull trigger.

Down went Cavorca's horse, plunging and kicking. The outlaw was hurled over the horse's head. He turned a complete handspring in the air, lit on his feet and lit running. The other fugitive pulled to a hoof-sliding halt. Cavorca left the ground like a spring, forked the bronc behind the saddle, and away went the pair.

Rance, shoving cartridges into his empty guns, saw them vanish around a turn.

Men were pouring from the courthouse. Bullets began to strike all around the Ranger. He dodged behind a post and returned the fire with interest. He emptied two saddles as quickly as they were filled; but the post wasn't thick enough, he realized, as a slug cut a furrow along the inside of his left arm and another grazed his right cheek.

He went across the street in a zigzag run, paused in the scant shelter of a hitch-rack and emptied his guns after the dying thunder of hoofs.

A shouting, milling crowd filled the street.

"The Ranger got two of them," somebody yelled, "and theah's another dead one inside the co'hthouse."

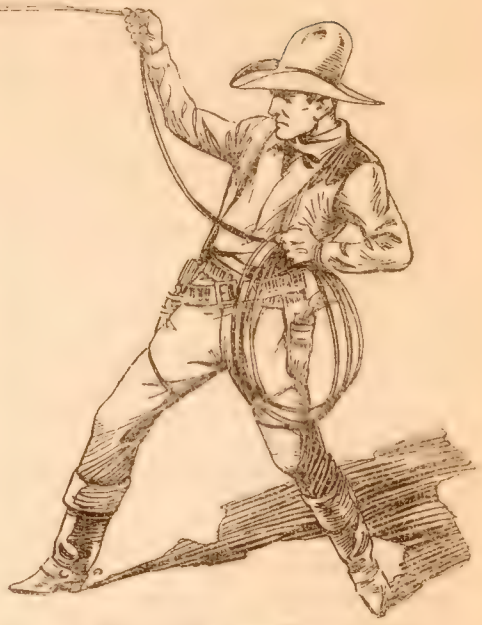
Rance loaded his guns and walked down the street.

"Cavorca got away!" a fat man squalled at him. Rance recognized the fat man as the town's mayor.

"Uh-huh, I see he did," Rance replied.

"Ye-a-ah!" raved the fat mayor. "Jest goes to show what a helluva lot of use the Rangers are! Let a herd of greaser gun-slingers amble 'crost the Line, shoot respectable citizens down and snake a murderer right outa the co'hthouse. Rangers! Jest a lotta lazy galoots usin' up the taxpayers' money! This'll settle the lot of yuh, though. Come the next legislature and the Territory'll be shed of yuh."

FOR a moment the utter injustice of the attack left Rance speechless. Before he had recovered, another was speaking. Rance recognized Walsh Patton, the county prosecutor. Patton was an angular, lantern-jawed individual with mean eyes and a



Ranger Rance Hatfield

meaner disposition. He was political boss of Cochise County and had a pull that reached all the way to Washington.

"Keepin' a eye on the Border's a Ranger's job, ain't it?" demanded Patton. "That's one of the arg'ments used tuh get the last legislature to vote fer organizin' the Rangers. Swell job yuh're doin'. Tomaso Fuentes and his whole revolution army could come 'crost any time he feels like it, for all anythin' yuh fellers'd do tuh stop him."

Rance Hatfield's lips set in a grim line, choking back the angry words of reply that stormed for expression. Nothing would be gained by arguing with either Patton or Mayor Thomas.

Nor would anything be gained by reminding them that the help the Rangers had offered to safeguard Cavorca had been curtly refused by the county authorities.

Patton and Thomas, leaders of a clan bitterly opposed to the newly formed body, the Arizona Rangers,

would make the most of the convicted bandit's escape, slurring over their own culpability, using every means in their power to cause the Territory in general to believe Ranger negligence was responsible for the successful coup.

Rance quietly asked a question of the gathering crowd.

"How many got killed in the co'hthouse?"

The sheriff and his deputy were dead, Rance quickly learned. Two cowboys and the cattleman, Blanton, were badly wounded. The judge was suffering from shock and a smashed shoulder.

The bandits had taken their wounded with them.

"Ain'tcha gonna get a posse t'gether and chase 'em?" the fat mayor demanded of Rance.

"Chase 'em wheah?" asked the Ranger, jerking a scornful head toward the purple mountains looming only a few miles south of the town. "Theah's Mexico, so clost yuh kin hit it with a rock. They're acrost the Line by now, wheah we ain't got no 'thority. And don't fool yoreself, feller," he added, "theah's a young army watin' tuh j'in Cavorca down theah."

The mayor indulged in a sneer, after Rance had turned and walked away.

"Theah's the Rangers fer yuh!" he snorted. "Ain't got the nerve to get a posse t'gether and chase them fellers."

A lanky, hard-bitten cowboy regarded him coldly.

"I rec'lects it was that theah same Ranger what caught Cavorca in the fust place, and 'tacked his whole gang and got shot up doin' it," he drawled. "Likewise it was the Ranger's gun what 'counted fer two o' them three 'good' bandits layin' over theah under blankets. I figger yuh fellers'd do well tuh sing sorta small fer a while."

CHAPTER II

Carmencita

ONCE his wounded arm was bandaged, Rance rode out of town, alone. He headed north.

"What them jiggers back theah don't know won't hurt 'em, and what's a darn sight more important, it won't hurt us," he told his magnificent black stallion, El Rey. "I ain't so sho' but somebody theah knowed all 'bout that raid 'fore it happened. It was timed mighty fine for guesswork."

As the Ranger rode, he did some very serious thinking.

"Patton and Thomas warn't talkin' fer me to hear," he growled. "They was talkin' to the crowd. They're buildin' up a case 'gainst the Rangers, and 'tween you and me, hoss, they're doin' a purty darn good job of it. No use tellin' folks they practic'lly ordered us to stay away from their blasted town while the trial was goin' on. They'll jest keep on squallin' that it was the Rangers' job to keep that gang from sneakin' 'crost the Line. They'll spread it 'bout that if the Rangers had had their eyes open it couldn'ta happened. Thomas owns a newspaper and Patton has the ear of all the political big bugs in the Territory. Hoss, theah's jest one way out—you and me has gotta hawgtie Cavorca again!"

Out of the Ranger's desperation had been born a plan—a plan fraught with such danger and difficulty as to make its success possible through its very daring. Rance tied its loose ends together as he rode through the lovely blue dusk of the Southwest.

Three miles north of the town he entered the gloomy canyon.

The canyon wound and twisted in a confusing manner. When Rance

finally rode out of it, under a blazing net of stars that seemed to brush the mountain tops, he was headed a trifle south of west. A little later he turned into a dim track that ran due south.

"This oughta cut 'crost their trail," he mused. "I figger they'll head straight for Paloa. That's a tough *pueblo* if theah ever was one. It's Tomaso Fuentes' town, too, and Fuentes is too big a shot fer even the Diaz gov'ment to monkey with, much. Cavorca'll feel safe theah till he gits his bearin's."

A few miles farther on the track *did* cross another trail, a better and more traveled one. Rance nodded with satisfaction.

His satisfaction was even greater when he reached a sagging barbed-wire fence. Where the fence crossed the trail, the strands had been cut. Without hesitation Rance rode through the gap. He had another talk with his horse.

"Guess yuh know, feller, that fence marks the Line. We're in Mexico now, and the only 'thority we got heah is what we carries in our heels and holsters. Them heels of yores has got us outa more'n one jam. Don't ferget I'm dependin' on 'em t'night."

The black horse rolled his eyes and snorted. Then he jingled the bit impatiently and quickened his stride. Rance scanned the shadowy loom of the mountains ahead.

A discouraged slice of moon climbed painfully over the eastern crags, paling the golden stars to silver, flooding the rolling prairie with ghostly light. It was well after midnight.

Other stars pricked through the black shadows ahead. Golden stars that did not pale as the moonlight drenched them. Rance checked the stallion's pace somewhat as the golden stars grew larger.

"That'll be Paloa," he muttered. "Lots of lights for this time o' night. Looks like they're celebratin' somethin'. Mebbe we can help 'em to make her a bit livelier."

He pulled the horse to a walk before he reached the outskirts of the town. Hoofs making little or no sound, the black ambled between rows of dark houses. Now and then the adobe wall of a garden straightened out and lowered the ragged line of the roofs. Ahead lights glowed.

Rance began to hear music—the strumming of guitars, the rippling notes of song. Then the tap and shuffle of dancing feet, the clink of glasses and the slithering whisper of cards.

The blank windows gave way to gleaming squares. The voices of men and women tumbled merrily through the doorways. Figures passed and repassed the slanting bars of light.

Rance tied his horse at a convenient rack, loosened his guns in their holsters and crossed the street to where a wide-flung door beckoned. He had little fear of attracting undue attention — roving cowboys, miners, prospectors and such were too common to cause comment. The only danger lay in recognition.

HE entered the *cantina*, narrowing his eyes against the sudden glare of light.

The saloon was well crowded. Men lined the long bar from end to end. Card games were going on at several tables. A roulette wheel whirred steadily. Couples whirled about on the dance floor.

Rance bought a drink and leaned against the bar, sweeping the room with a searching glance. He tossed off the drink and left the place; nothing of interest here.

The same applied to the next place, and the next. At two others, smaller and less crowded, he merely glanced through the door.

"Blazes," he growled. "Looks like

I dealt myself a hand from a cold deck."

A Mexican in a ragged *serape* sidled up alongside him. He purred a sentence in soft Spanish.

"The *senor* is a stranger here, *si?*"

Rance replied cautiously.

"S'posin' I am?"

"I thought," said the Mexican politely, "he might be seeking diversion, entertainment."

"And if I am?"

"Then," explained the other, "the *senor* assuredly should go to Miguel's *cantina;* Carmencita dances there tonight."

"Who's Carmencita?"

The Mexican shrugged his shoulders until the ragged blanket nearly slipped from around him. His hands spread wide in an expressive gesture.

"Ah, indeed is the *senor* a stranger! He knows not Carmencita? *Valgame Dios!* He knows not the sun of morning! He knows not the moonlight caressing the cheek of the rose with silver kisses! He knows not the dying stars singing together in the pale light of dawn. He—"

"Hold on!" snorted Rance. "Yuh been eatin' loco weed? What yuh talkin' 'bout, anyhow?"

"*Senor,* I talk of Carmencita. Will not you come and see?"

"Hell, guess I'll hafta," Rance told him. "Trail yore rope, feller, I'll be right on yore tail. Wait a minute till I get my hoss."

STRAIGHT through the town the *peon* led. To where the lights were fewer and the music less. He turned into a side street, rounded another corner and paused.

"This, *senor,*" he said, "is Miguel's."

The *cantina* was a big one. It sprawled along the street in an ungainly haphazard fashion. Light glowed softly through the recessed windows. Equally soft music seeped through the smoke-golden raze of the light. Rance could hear subdued laughter and the murmur of voices.

"All right, let's go in," he told his guide.

The *peon* hung back.

"But no, *senor,* Miguel's is not for such as I. *Miguel's* is for great *senors,* and their *senoritas.* I but show the way to those who know not Miguel's. If the *senor* could spare—"

Rance chuckled, and handed the fellow a *peso.*

"*Gracias, senor! Muchas gracias!*" A white-toothed grin splitting the dark face, a flirt of the ragged *serape,* and the peon was gone.

"Off to drop his loop on another *gringo,*" Rance grinned. "Wonder what we'll find in this *hacienda?*"

The door was ajar. Rance pushed it open and entered. He sauntered to the bar, which stretched all the way across one end of the room, and ordered a drink. The bartender nodded pleasantly but offered no comment. Evidently *gringos* were not so uncommon in Miguel's as to cause question.

As he sipped the golden *mescal,* Rance searched the room from under the low-drawn brim of his wide hat. He could see that it was pretty well occupied, but the lights were dim and he could make out little of the faces of those seated at the various tables. His attention centered on a flashily dressed Mexican lounging to one side of the cleared dancing floor.

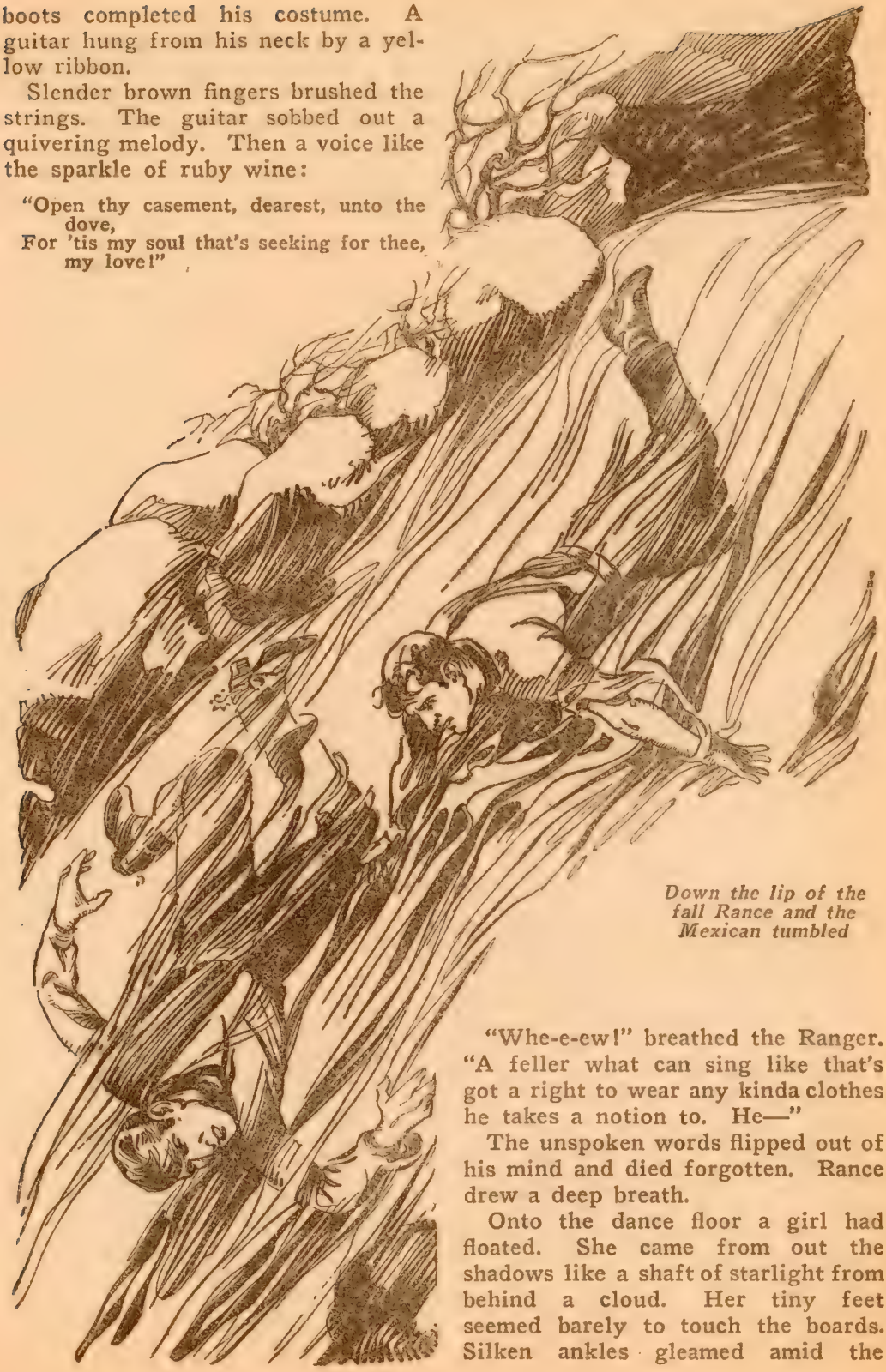
"That jigger looks like a rainbow what's got tangled in a flower garden," Rance told himself.

The Mexican *was* gorgeous. His pantaloons, tight-fitting, low-cut vest and flowing cloak were of green velvet. Down the front of the cloak and the front of the pantaloons were broad yellow stripes on which were embroidered roses, pansies and tulips life-size and of brilliant color. Snowy white shirt, black tie, flat black velvet cap and fancy stitched

boots completed his costume. A guitar hung from his neck by a yellow ribbon.

Slender brown fingers brushed the strings. The guitar sobbed out a quivering melody. Then a voice like the sparkle of ruby wine:

"Open thy casement, dearest, unto the dove,
For 'tis my soul that's seeking for thee, my love!"



Down the lip of the fall Rance and the Mexican tumbled

"Whe-e-ew!" breathed the Ranger. "A feller what can sing like that's got a right to wear any kinda clothes he takes a notion to. He—"

The unspoken words flipped out of his mind and died forgotten. Rance drew a deep breath.

Onto the dance floor a girl had floated. She came from out the shadows like a shaft of starlight from behind a cloud. Her tiny feet seemed barely to touch the boards. Silken ankles gleamed amid the

froth of her tossing skirts. Her arms and shoulders glowed white-gold under the soft lights. She was small and slender, with great dark eyes and tossing short dark curls. Instantly Rance recognized her.

"And *that's* 'Carmencita!'" breathed the Ranger. He knew her well—Gypsy Carvil—kin to Cavorca, whom she was trying futilely to reclaim.

CHAPTER III

Gun Smoke

AS the girl danced, Rance noticed that most of her glances went to a table a little apart from the others and nearer the bar. The Ranger divided his attention between the girl and table.

Three men sat at the table. Two wore the flashy uniform of officers of the army. Rance wondered what they were doing here in the stronghold of the rebel, Fuentes.

The third man was swarthily handsome, with a tremendous spread of shoulders and gorilla arms. Rance eyed him speculatively.

"Somethin' darn familiar 'bout that *hombre,*" he mused. "I've seen him somewheah."

The big man turned his head, revealing a livid scar that gashed one ear from top to lobe and slanted down his neck. Rance swore softly.

"Tomaso Fuentes hisself! This is gettin' interestin'."

The friendly drink-juggler leaned across the bar.

"Ai! She is *una bellisima moza!"*

Rance nodded. He heartily agreed that Carmencita was a very beautiful girl. The bartender sighed.

"Ai! But she has eyes for none but *un gran general!"*

This time Rance did not heed. Instead, he frowned. Somehow, the idea of Carmencita having eyes for no one but the big general, meaning Fuentes, did not meet with his approval. He called to mind some of the vicious practises and abominable cruelties credited to the revolutionary.

"Pig!" he growled as Fuentes gulped his glass.

"Eh?" exclaimed the startled bartender. "I see no *puerco, senor!"*

"Yore eyes ain't p'inted right," chuckled Rance. "How come the little lady's got such a leanin' toward Fuentes?"

The bartender glanced furtively about, saw that the attention of all was fixed on the dance, and leaned closer.

"There is a whispered story, *senor,* a story that says Carmencita, whose name is not Carmencita at all, came to Fuentes and begged of him help for one she loved. She offered him much gold, the story goes, but Fuentes shook his head. 'Dance for me in Miguel's,' said *un gran general*—Miguel is but Fuentes' manager, *senor*—'and perhaps we shall come to terms.'"

"Then what?" asked the Ranger. The bartender leaned still nearer.

"Night after night she danced, *senor,* and night after night Fuentes sat and watched. The time grew short, and Carmencita grew desperate, for Fuentes would not name his price, nor would he promise his help. Then, the morning of yesterday, when Carmencita had all but despaired, Fuentes named his price."

"Uh-huh, and that was—"

The bartender glanced toward the dark-eyed girl floating and swaying in time to the music, graceful as the wind of dawn amid the flowers. His eyes slowly left her and focused on the Ranger's lean, bronzed face.

"Senor," he whispered softly, "the price was—*herself!"*

Rance Hatfield turned upon the Mexican a glance bleak as wind sweeping across snow-sifted ice.

"Feller, why yuh tellin' me this?"

The dark eyes met his squarely.

"*Senor,*" said the Mexican, "a worm looking up from the mire might love a rose, and never hope to possess it. Still, the lowly worm would not wish to see the rose crushed and befouled by the foot of —a *pig!*"

RANCE nodded grimly. "I see; but wheah do I come intuh this?"

"They who ride the range for Arizona are brave men, and resourceful men," murmured the bartender with apparent irrelevance.

Rance's eyes narrowed still more.

"So the jigger knows I'm a Ranger," ran through his mind. "Well, he must be on the level, or he'd hardly tip his hand this way."

"What'd *la senorita* have to say 'bout it?" he asked aloud.

"What could she say?" The bartender shrugged. "Fuentes is crafty. He had gained her confidence. He can be most charming and courteous when it is necessary to be such, to gain his ends. This room—the town —is filled with his men. *La senorita* learned she was a prisoner, helpless. She fought for time—insisted that first Fuentes must do the thing she asked. He consented, for it amused and pleased him to do it. To do it was to injure those he hates. Yesterday, as the day changed to night, he did it. Tonight he plays with her as the cat plays with the mouse. Tonight he demands his price."

Rance thought swiftly.

"Feller, can yuh get outa heah without anybody askin' questions?"

"Assuredly, *senor,* I often go out on errands."

"All right. My hoss is tied acrost the street—the big black one at the little rack by hisself. Get that hoss untied and lead him over to this side the street. When I pitch *la senorita* out of the door, yuh grab her, get on that hoss with her and hightail for the Border."

"And you, *senor?*"

"Nev' mind me. I'll be right on yore tail, if things go right. I'll take one of them other hosses. 'Fraid tuh take a chance with the girl on one of them. Mine's gentle and'll carry double 'thout makin' a fuss. If I don't catch up with yuh 'fore yuh git to the Line, yuh head straight for Ranger headquarters. Tell Captain Morton what happened. He'll look out for yuh and *la senorita* till I get theah."

"*Si, senor,* I go now. *Adios.*"

"So long."

The bartender called an assistant who lounged by the back-bar, spoke a word to him and shuffled out the door.

Rance hammered the bar with his empty glass. "Fill 'em up," he mumbled blearily. "Have one on me."

The assistant grinned, and complied. Rance tossed off the *mescal* like so much water. "Heck," he shouted, "tha's got no kick! Make the next one *tequila!* Have 'nother one on me! Who-o-o-oppe-e-e!"

Occupants of the tables turned, frowning at the racket by the bar. The singer missed a note. Rance tossed off his glass of fiery *tequila* and roared for another. He staggered about to face the tables.

"Ev'body drinks on me!" he whooped, jingling a gold piece onto the bar. "Set up the house!"

The frowns changed to grins. Free drinks was something else. If the drunken *gringo* was willing to pay for his fun, why let him have it?

Waiters hurried forward with empty glasses, and hurried back to the tables with them filled.

"Drink up! Drink up!" howled the Ranger. "We gotta have 'nother round."

Another gold piece clinked on the bar. The drink dispenser opened fresh bottles.

The music had stopped. The dancer stood listlessly waiting for the hurrying waiters to clear the floor. Rance spun a coin to the musician.

"Play somethin' quick an' devilish!" he ordered.

The grinning Mexican swept into the lilting roll of a fandango. Rance reeled across the floor.

"C'mon, lady, le's dance!" he whooped, sweeping Gypsy Carvel into his arms. From the tail of his eye he saw Tomaso Fuentes frown angrily and half rise from his seat. But the crowd howled with glee and the revolutionary evidently thought better of his first impulse to interfere.

The girl was stumbling and reeling in the Ranger's staggering embrace.

"Rance!" she whispered tremulously. "Don't—don't try to help me—here. It will mean death."

Rance lurched and whirled toward the door, yelping a wordless accompaniment to the music.

"Listen, Gypsy," he snapped between yelps, "I'll get yuh outa this—hoss outside—ride like hell—tuh th' Border—un'stan'?"

He heard her breath catch sharply.

FASTER and faster drummed the music. Wilder and wilder grew the Ranger's whoops and leaps. The crowd was still laughing, but Fuentes' face was darkening with an ugly scowl.

Rance whirled the girl clear off the dance floor and right opposite the door.

"Steady!" he hissed. "Yuh're goin'."

"But you! What—"

"Be right behind yuh. All right—*out!*"

A bound and he had reached the door. He kicked it open, saw the bartender's form looming in the shaft of light. He hurled the girl into his arms.

"Adelante! Muy presto!" he shouted.

Rance saw the two figures vanish from the light, heard the black horse snort. He whirled to face the roaring *cantina*, both guns coming out.

Men were boiling toward him. Tomaso Fuentes in the lead, snarling with a rage that was frightful.

"Hold it!" shouted the Ranger as El Rey's hoofs thundered away from the building. "I don't wanta hurt yuh fellers if I don't hafta!"

A knife droned past his ear. Somewhere in the back of the room a gun boomed. Rance heard the whine of the passing slug. Fuentes was throwing down with a big gun.

The Ranger went into action. He kicked a table over, crouched behind the heavy oaken top and let loose with both guns. A man with a knife poised for the throw went down. One of the gaily clad army officers dropped his drawn gun and grabbed at a broken arm. Tomaso Fuentes went behind a table like a rabbit into its burrow.

The crowd gave back, huddling against the far wall, the fight taken out of them. Only Fuentes and the remaining army officer kept up a steady fire.

Rance smashed the army man's shoulder with a bullet from his left-hand gun. He took careful aim at what he could see of Fuentes' head and pulled trigger.

"Gotcha!" he exulted as Fuentes reeled back. Rance half rose from his crouch, gliding toward the open door.

Crash!

The roof of the *cantina* split asunder, letting in great whirls and blazes of pain-streaked light. After them came rolling black clouds. Rance knew he was falling, but he never knew when he hit the floor.

The bartender's assistant, who had crept in back of the Ranger, snarled down at the prostrate form and

poised his heavy bung starter for another blow. It was not needed.

The wounded army officer aimed a gun with his left hand, but Tomaso Fuentes, blood streaming from an ugly gash just above the line of his black hair, struck the weapon up.

"No!" he barked. "That ees too easy. Me, *I* will take care of thees stealer of women!"

CHAPTER IV

Teeth In the Dark

COMING back to consciousness was an unpleasant business for Rance. A splitting headache, a devilish sickness in the pit of his stomach and a general gone-to-hell feeling.

He tried to sit up, and didn't have much luck. Then he realized that his feet were roped and his hands tied behind his back. He rooted his nose into a dirty blanket, hunched his legs and finally managed to back himself up against a board wall.

"Now wheah the blazes've I got tuh?" he wondered, staring about the unfamiliar room. "Sho' ain't that *cantina* wheah the roof fell on my haid," he decided, eyeing a rickety table, a broken chair and a rusty sheet-iron stove.

A hollow groan jerked his eyes about and centered them on a blanket-tumbled bunk built against an end wall.

Something writhed under the blankets, heaved itself up.

"Bull-bellerin' blue blazes!" cried the Ranger.

A mat of frowsy hair, a cactus-patched stubble of whiskers, and two wild black eyes met his gaze.

"Quien es?" he demanded.

There came another groan, then a dismal eruption of Spanish profanity.

"That's right, pardner, git it off yore chest. I feel jest the same way 'bout it."

"Senor, you too are tied?"

"If I ain't, somebody done hypnotized me inter thinkin' I am. What's the big idea, anyhow?"

"Ai! Maldito! Caramba! Cien mil diablos! Tomaso Fuentes!"

"Uh-huh," Rance nodded as best he could. "Mebbe he ain't a hundred thousand devils, but he sho' is *one,* all right. What'd he tie yuh up for?"

The Mexican groaned again. "It was I, *senor,* who led those who rescued the bandit Cavorca from the clutches of the *gringos.* I was to bring Cavorca—may he be accursed and rest uneasy in his grave!—to Fuentes, who had use for him. Cavorca and *la senorita* who rode with us from Paloa, they—how you say eet?—give us the slip. Fuentes was angry, *ai,* most angry. He strike me! He tie me up! He say he feed me to the rats. *Huy! Caspita! Fuego!"*

While the Mexican continued to groan and swear, Rance slid into a somewhat less uncomfortable position and digested the information he had just received.

"So *that* is what Fuentes did for Gypsy Carvel?" he growled to himself. "Gypsy bribed Fuentes intuh sendin' a gang acrost the Border to turn Cavorca loose. She—sizzlin' sidewinders!—they said theah was a girl with that gang when they busted inter the co'hthouse! I bet a *peso* Gypsy was that girl! It was her rode away with him, shore as blazes. Then Cavorca sneaked off and she ambles back to Paloa. Bet she had a scheme figgered out all the time to leave Fuentes holdin' the sack.

"Anyhow, me, little Johnny-on-the-spot, comes along and plays right inter her hand. Feller, of all the prize suckers, yuh're it! Yuh risk slidin' into Paloa tryin' to get a line on Cavorca. Then yuh fergit all 'bout what yuh come for and help

his cousin, Gypsy, to keep from payin' a honest debt. And all yuh got to show fer yore brightness is a lump on yore empty haid! How long, I wonder, is she gonna keep on tryin' to make a silk purse outa a sow's ear?"

The Mexican tensed in an attitude of listening.

"Somebody comes," he hissed.

THE door was kicked open. A giant of a man with a bandaged head entered. After him came several others. Rance grinned into the face of the revolutionary leader, Fuentes.

"Hi, Tomaso? You got a headache, too?"

Fuentes glared down at the Ranger. Then an evil smile writhed his lips back from his yellow teeth.

"Ha! You live! Eet ees most fortunate, although, *Senor* Ranger, you will no doubt soon not think so. I am rejoice to see you not dead—yet. Soon you weel be dead, *si*, but not too soon. Ha! ha! ha!"

Rance felt a cold chill creep up his spine as the evil laughter rang through the room. The Mexican on the other bunk gave a dismal howl. Fuentes strode to him and slapped him across the mouth.

"Save your yelps, you," he snarled in Spanish. "Soon you will have greater need of them. When the time comes, see if you can scream louder and longer than will the *gringo*."

He barked an order to the men who had accompanied him. They shuffled forward, lifted Rance and the Mexican from the bunks and carried them through the door.

The setting sun was drenching the mountain tops with red-gold and turquoise-green, and by its light Rance saw that he and his companion had been imprisoned in a small, roughly constructed cabin.

"No wonder I'm thirsty and darn neah starved," he mused. "Been out most of the night and all day. Wonder wheah we're headed fer? An ant hill, or a stake with a fire built 'round it?"

He believed Fuentes capable of either atrocity.

The cabin, Rance could see by craning his neck, sat on the lower slope of a mountain. All about were rocks and spiny cactus plants and desolation. He was being carried up the slope.

A dark opening loomed in the face of a beetling cliff. The bearers paused. Matches scratched. The bearers resumed their march.

By the dim flare of candles, Rance could see rock and earthen walls shored by rotting timbers. The timbers arched overhead.

"An old mine tunnel," he deduced. "Now what the—"

On and on stumbled the bearers, panting with their loads. Rance could hear Fuentes cursing them and urging speed. They entered a cutting that criss-crossed the main tunnel, turned into another, and still another. Finally before a door of heavy timbers they paused.

Rance heard the rattle of keys, the creak of rusty hinges. The bearers shuffled forward a few steps. Fuentes called a halt. Rance and the Mexican were flung carelessly onto the rock floor. Fuentes bent over the Ranger, the candlelight glinting on his evil eyes.

"*Adios, Senor* Ranger," he purred. "When comes the sharp little teeth to keep you company in th dark, think you on how you make the fool of Tomaso Fuentes. Think—and pay!"

The candles withdrew. The door crashed shut. The Mexican prisoner gave one terror-stricken yell as the darkness closed down like a sodden blanket, and began to whimper.

"Figgerin' on leavin' us to starve," Rance grunted, straining at his bonds. "Well, we'll see 'bout that.

Shut up, you!" he shouted to the Mexican. "We ain't dead yet and we won't be fer a long time."

"Teeth!" screamed the Mexican. "Little teeth, sharp in the dark!"

"What the hell yuh talkin' 'bout?" demanded the Ranger.

The Mexican jabbered incoherent Spanish that Rance could not follow. The Ranger could hear him thrashing about.

"Scared so bad he's done gone plumb loco, I guess," Rance decided. "Now if I kin jest work a hand loose."

He strained and tugged, but whoever had fastened the knots knew his job.

"That jigger could hawgtie a lightnin' flash with a live rattlesnake," the Ranger panted. "Gosh, I'm numb all over from bein' roped up so long. Wrists is all bleedin', too. Wonder if I could talk that yelpin' lunatic inter tryin' to chaw me loose. Nope, that's out—it's a hair rope and his teeth couldn't cut it in a month. Gotta think of somethin' better'n that."

For long minutes he lay thinking, with no results.

The Mexican was babbling wildly. Suddenly his voice rose in a shriek of pain and terror.

"They come!" he screamed.

"Shut up!" Rance roared. "What's comin'?"

"*Mira!* Look!" howled the Mexican.

RANCE looked, and felt his hair prickle. In the darkness, ringing him about, were dozens of fiery points of light. Points that slowly moved closer. He could hear a faint slithering on the stone.

"What is it?" he shouted. The Mexican thrashed and kicked.

"Rats, *senor,* giant rats! They starve here in the deserted mine. They are bold from hunger! We shall be eaten while yet we live. *Dios!* Already they are nipping me!"

His thrashings redoubled. His screams rang from the rock walls.

Rance jerked convulsively. A sharp, stinging pain had shot along one of his bound wrists. The famished rodents were closing in. Cold sweat broke out on his forehead. He gulped back a mad urge to yell and scream even as the Mexican was doing.

"Gawd!" he gasped, "I gotta do somethin'!"

Another sharp sting in the wrist. He rolled wildly onto his back, crushed a sneaking, writhing thing under his weight, and lunged away from the wriggling horror. Blazing sparks of light glared right into his eyes, and he jerked his head back as teeth clashed together a fraction of an inch from his cheek. He felt that in another instant he would go stark mad.

"Gotta keep movin'," he gasped, rolling over on his face.

As he did so, something gouged sharply into his breast. He winced from the pain, wondering what it could be. Remembrance rushed to his aid and with it came a wild hope. Over and over he rolled, until he barged into his thrashing companion. The Mexican gave a louder yell of terror.

"Listen!" Rance thundered in his ear. "Shut up and listen to me!"

The other's howls died to gasps and pants. "I listen, *senor,* I listen!"

"Get yore haid over heah 'gainst my shirt front!" Rance ordered. "Rip the pocket off with yore teeth. Theah's a box of matches in it. Get holt of that with yore teeth, if yuh kin. Hustle!"

Grunting and groaning, the other did as he was told. Rance felt the pocket tear loose. A moment of nuzzling and prodding. Then the Mexican had it.

"Steady," cautioned Rance. "Hang onto it till I get holt of it with *my*

teeth. Soon as I do, sink yore fangs into this handkerchief 'round my neck and pull it over my haid. Drop it on the ground. Damn them brutes, they're chawin' my legs!"

Rance got the match box in his teeth. He snuggled his head down and in another moment the handkerchief came jerking and snaking over it. He rooted his face down until he could feel the soft silk where it lay on the rock floor. Then he began chewing madly at the wooden match box.

Splinters raked his gums. In his mouth was the taste of sulphur. A rat bit him on the cheek. Another tore at one of his hands. Then he got a match head squarely between his front teeth.

He crunched down on it with a quick, grinding motion. There was a burst of flame, then a blinding flare in his eyes and a lancing pain in his mouth as the whole box caught fire.

Onto the big handkerchief Rance dropped the blazing box. The rats squealed away in terror. The Mexican screamed. The silk caught fire.

With desperate haste Rance then hunched and wriggled until his bound wrists were against the flaming cloth. The smell of burning hair rope and scorching flesh filled the tunnel. Rance set his teeth, cold sweat popping out on his forehead, his body shivering with pain.

Grimly enduring the agony, he held his wrists against the fire. The blaze flickered, died down, winked out. Rance gave a mighty heave that sent torture coursing through his veins.

The charred rope stretched and crackled, ripped apart. Panting and gulping. the Ranger relaxed against the cold rock.

"*Senor,*" quavered the Mexican, "they come back!"

"To hell with 'em," growled Rance, fumbling at the cords that held his ankles, "we got 'em licked. I'll have yuh loose in a minute."

Once on their feet, a few well directed kicks disposed of the rats. The rodents fled squealing into the holes from which they had been drawn by the smell of flesh and blood.

"Now," said Rance, "let's get outa heah. I feel like I'd been put through a sausage grinder piece at a time!"

The Mexican was examining the door. He found a few overlooked matches in his pockets and struck one. He shrugged despairingly as the flare showed the massive timbers and the heads of big studs that clamped a heavy bar in place.

"*Senor,*" he said, "I fear we are doomed. The door is fastened on the outside. We can never break it down."

"We won't try," Rance told him. "We'll find some other way outa this rat nest."

ONE of the Mexican's matches started them off down a low-roofed, winding tunnel.

"Save the rest of 'em," Rance counseled. "We may need 'em bad 'fore we get out. Hope we'll find some water soon."

Water was the pressing need. The Ranger's throat was like an oven. His tongue was swelling. His scorched lips and wrists added to his sufferings. The Mexican was in little better shape, having been held prisoner even longer than had Rance. He began to mutter incoherently and pushed ahead of the Ranger.

"Take it easy, feller," Rance cautioned anxiously. "Yuh might fall in a hole or somethin'."

The other laughed wildly and staggered on.

"This tunnel leads right straight to hell, I guess," swore the Ranger. "Well, it'll save us the trouble of

doin' any back-trackin' when we cash in. What's yore name, pardner?"

"Angel," the other replied.

"They won't even hafta change it," Rance chuckled mirthlessly, "jest hand yuh a harp and let yuh keep trailin' right along."

The Mexican began to laugh wildly, hysterically. The low tunnel rang dully to his maniacal mirth. Rance shivered in spite of his efforts to ignore it.

"Shut up, yuh loco *hombre!*" he shouted. "Yuh'll have me pickin' things outa the air, too!"

"Ho! ho! ho!" roared the madman. "Is it not droll, *senor?* We—"

There was a prodigious splash, a strangled yell, and then Angel's voice, perfectly sane and badly frightened:

"Help, *senor,* help! I am carried away!"

Instinctively Rance darted forward. Without the least warning the ground vanished from beneath his feet and he found himself struggling in deep, swift water. He went under, gulped, strangled, and broke surface again.

"For Pete's sake!" he sputtered. "I wanted a drink, but it warn't necessary tuh pour a river down my neck. Wheah are yuh, Angel?"

A gurgling squeal somewhere in the darkness ahead answered him. Rance struck out strongly, guided by a spouting and thrashing. His outreaching hand touched something and in another instant he had Angel by the collar.

"Stop yore kickin', 'fore I bust yuh one!" he panted. "Keep still and do as I tell yuh."

The Mexican became quiet, and Rance kept their two heads above water without much difficulty. He did not attempt to breast the current, which ran like a mill race. A tentative try to right and left brought him up against smooth rock walls.

"Runs through a cross tunnel," he reasoned. "If this galiwumpus hadn't been makin' such a racket we'd've heard it and not tumbled inter it."

Angel's teeth were clicking together like a pair of dice in a darky's hand.

"*Senor,*" he gasped, "I freeze!"

"I ain't warm myself," Rance admitted.

In fact, the icy chill of the dark water was worrying him more than a little. There was more than discomfort in the cold—there was a deadly threat.

"I'm gettin' numb already," ran the Ranger's thought. "All I can do right now to hang onto this ground-flyin' cherubim. A little more of this and—good gosh! What in thunder's that?"

They had spun around a bend, scraping the rock wall an instant and then shooting back into the middle of the stream. Completely blocking the tunnel ahead was a sheet of intense white fire, growing brighter and fiercer as they swept toward it.

"*Madre de Dios!*" howled Angel. "Already are we dead! The flames of *el Infierno* await us!"

FOR an instant Rance was inclined to agree with the Mexican; then he understood and his strangled whoop of joy rang between the narrow walls.

"It's the sun!" he shouted. "It's jest comin' up and shinin' right inter this roofed river. Feller, we're on our way *out!*"

Angel's answer was a terrified yelp as they went plunging over the lip of a fall. Down they shot, beaten, hammered, half drowned. They struck the deep pool beneath the fall and were pounded almost to the bottom by the rushing water. When they broke surface again Angel hadn't a yell left in him.

He did have quite a bit of water, however.

The stream below the fall was swift but shallow. Rance waded to shore, dragging the gurgling Angel by the collar. Once on solid ground again, he took the Mexican by the middle and shook most of the water out of him.

"That oughta hold yuh," he decided at last. "Now wheah are we, I wonder?"

Angel sat up, still gulping. Shakily he got to his feet and stared about.

"Senor," he quavered, "I know. I recognize that range of low hills to the left. Beyond those hills is a trail which will lead us to the home of a friend of mine. He will give us food and provide you with a horse. You can reach the Border then in but a few hours."

"What yuh gonna do?" Rance asked as they scrambled up the hill. "Can't go back to Fuentes, can yuh?"

"God forbid! Never do I wish to see his face again. Nor the faces of my companions, nor of any *bandido. Senor,* beside you walks a changed man. *Por Dios!* When I have rested I start for Sinaloa, far to the south. There my old father and my brothers till the soil and live in peace. I, too, will till the soil and find peace. Cursed be the day I left it to seek adventure!"

"That's right, feller," Rance chuckled, "yuh try and live up to yore name from now on."

Angel's friend proved to be a *chacerero*—the owner of a *chacra,* or small ranch. He received the famished pair with true Mexican hospitality, fed them, treated their numerous cut and burns and bites and bruises and dried their clothes. Three hours later, feeling like a new man, though deadly weary and gaunt from lack of sleep, Rance rode a borrowed horse to the Border.

CHAPTER V

Silver City

RANCE found Captain Morton, at Ranger headquarters, a worried man. His most pressing concern was relieved when Rance turned up, but he still had plenty to get off his chest.

"Cavorca makin' a successful break that way after bein' convicted of robbery and murder has kicked up one devil of a row," he told Rance, after the Ranger had recounted his experiences. "Jim Thomas and Walsh Patton are workin' like pack rats in a sack of buttons. They got a petition goin' to present to the legislature when it meets. And I heah they got plenty of signers. Petition says the Rangers is nothin' but a burden on the taxpayers, ain't needed and don't do no good. They're playin' up Cavorca's getaway big. He's their ace-in-the-hole."

"Uh-huh," Rance nodded gravely. "And he's *our* ace-in-the-hole, too."

"What d'yuh mean by that?" demanded Morton.

"Jest this, Boss. Thomas and Patton and their crowd is tyin' their whole case 'gainst the Rangers on Cavorca gettin' away. With Cavorca hawgtied, the whole thing'd tumble down like a 'dobe stable in a flood. All we got to do is get Cavorca again."

Morton snorted like a bull in a pepper patch. "Uh-huh, thass all!"

Rance Hatfield leaned forward, his grey-green eyes cold as mountain water flecked with snow.

"Boss, I'll get that horned toad if I hafta ride a gunpowder hoss through hell to do it. Jest turn me loose on him is all I ask."

"All right," Morton sighed. "Yuh got him onct. Mebbe yuh kin do it again. If yuh can, yuh'll save the Rangers. Governor Murphy is our

friend, and he b'lieves in the Rangers. If we kin show him that hyderphobia skunk, Cavorca, nicely corralled 'hind a set of iron zigzags, or with daylight shinin' through him, Murphy'll be able to whip the legislature into line and give Patton and Thomas the run-around. If we can't! Well, feller, guess yuh and me kin go back to punchin' cows fer a livin'! Theah's times when I wish I'd never quit! Now yuh fergit all 'bout it and pound yore ear a while."

A trifle diffidently, Rance asked a question:

"That girl, Carmencita, wheah'd—"

"Hell, all this worryin' knocked it clean outa my mind—most forgot to tell yuh," Morton interrupted. "Yore Mexican barkeep showed up all right—I'll have him heah when yuh come 'round t'morrow—but the girl! Well, the way the barkeep tells it, right after they crossed the Line she dropped her handkerchief or somethin' and asked him tuh get it for her. Soon as he's on the ground, she slips into the saddle and away she goes. Nope, not back into Mexico—nawth on the Canyon Trail. Barkeep had a tough time leggin' it heah. 'Fraid he's lost most o' his faith in female human nature."

"Uh-huh, an' it looks like I lost the best saddle bronc I ever owned."

RANCE slept the clock around, and awoke stiff and sore but otherwise feeling fine. He got on the outside of a stack of flapjacks and a flock of cackle-berries and hustled to headquarters.

"Now ain't *that* fine!" he exclaimed as he sighted the building. "Anyhow she ain't no hoss thief."

Seated on the board sidewalk was the Mexican bartender, holding the reins of Rance's black stallion, El Rey.

The Mexican's teeth flashed white in his dark face. *"Ai, Capitan,* it is good to see you! The *caballo? Capitan,* last night a *vaquero* rode to the door of the *casa* where I sleep, knocked and rode off most quickly. Going to the door I beheld the black *caballo."*

Rance was staring at El Rey's saddle and bridle.

"Good gosh, what a hull!" he exclaimed. "Hand-tooled and mounted—an' look at that silver-mounted bit. Sa-a-y—"

The Mexican grinned and bobbed. *"Si, La Senorita* forgets not, nor is she ungrateful. Only the *caballos* of great *caballeros* are so equipped, *Capitan.* But *el Capitan* is himself a great gentleman. Should not his *caballo* bear only the best?"

Still slightly dazed, Rance hunted up Captain Morton.

"Sit down," said the captain. "Got any plans?"

"Uh-huh," Rance nodded. "I think I've figgered somethin'," he added before Morton could interrupt. "I cal'late Cavorca give Fuentes the slip so's he could get his own men t'gether fust and meet Tomaso on more'n an equal footin'. But they'll get t'gether, all right, an' 'tween 'em they'll cook up a fine kettle of hell. Covorca'll be needin' money bad and he'll hit some place this side the Border."

"The question is wheah?" worried Morton.

"Don't think theah's so much question 'bout it," said Rance. "He'll go wheah he figgers he kin make the biggest killin' and get away with it."

"And that's—"

"Silver City, huh?"

Captain Morton pounded on his desk. "Damn'd if I don't b'lieve yuh're right!"

The tall young Ranger stood up, flexing his long arms. "Guess a little ride is what I need tuh limber me up," he said, "so if it's okay with yuh, I'm headin' fer Silver City."

Like a hell-kettle set out to cool

—and not cooling — Silver City crouched on the shoulder of a grim mountain. High over the huddle of tents and shacks and false-fronted brick buildings loomed the great peak, dwarfing them, making them appear grotesque and sordid and ugly, casting its mighty shadow across the blistering desert that stretched away to the eastern skyline.

Dust storms boiled up from the desert, flung against the mountain wall and sifted back onto the roaring town. The blazing Arizona sun turned it to showers of gold. The cold, dead desert moon caused it to gleam with the frosty gleam of the silver bricks that men trundled down the loading platforms of Silver City's giant stamp mills.

DUST from the desert and silver from the mountain! That was Rance Hatfield's thought as he and the Mexican bartender, Pedro Hernandez, rode into Silver City late one afternoon.

Rance had seen Coffin and Concha and other Arizona hell-roarers, but Silver City could give them cards and spades and best them hands down. Silver City was the wildest, maddest, most turbulent town the Ranger had ever entered. Life was cheap in the mines, and men who were used to brushing fingertips with death by days cared little for his frozen grin at night. Life was short at best. Live it to the full while it lasted.

Blood and whiskey and gunsmoke and gold! Mix 'em up, and add a dash of lust and cruelty and greed. It made a grand devil's brew. Silver City drank deep.

From end to end of the town ran the great Alhambra silver lode. Dozens of mines gutted the mountain of its treasure. Under Silver City was another city—a city of timbered galleries extending hundreds of feet into the ground. From that underground city came the veined ore that was Silver City's life blood. Men slaved and mucked and sweated and died in that underground city. They rioted and fought and drank and played, and died, in the city seething above the gloomy galleries.

Then, too, the great C. & P. railroad was stretching steel fingers across the desert. Rawhidin' Dave Barrington and Jaggers Dunn were building a double-track line to the rich cattle and farming land beyond the scorching sands and the mountains. Silver City was now headquarters for the construction forces.

Cowboys riding north with their trail herds also stopped at Silver City, coming and going.

The cold-faced gamblers, the oily saloon keepers and the hawk-eyed women of the dance halls welcomed miner, railroader and puncher alike. A sprinkling of Mexicans and Apache half-breeds added spice to the mixture. Silver City whooped 'er up and threw the keys away.

"She's Dodge, Tombstone, Poker Flat and Deadwood rolled inter one and set afire," Rance said as he and Pedro stabled their horses. "Now, feller, yore job is to circ'late 'round through the Mexican section and see what yuh can find out. Most of Cavorca's men is Mexicans, and the odds are better'n even he'll have Mexican scouts gettin' the lay of things heah. Shavin' off yore whiskers and mustache oughta stop anybody from knowin' yuh, but keep yore eyes open. And remember, yuh and me is jest a coupla waddies on a cel'bration. Don't yuh get too darn drunk and go to talkin', though; and watch out for the *senoritas.*"

"Assuredly, *Captain,* will I watch out for them," grinned Pedro as he sauntered through the stable door, *sombrero* tilted rakishly over one eye, ever-present cigarette drooping from his lower lip.

"Now jest what did he mean by that?" chuckled Rance. "Well, I got a notion it'll take a smooth little *muchacha* to get the best of Pete."

By the time Rance had washed up and stowed away some chuck, the lively blue dusk of the desert land had snared mountain and sands in a net of beauty whose fringes reached trustingly toward the garish town, only to be beaten back by the hard blaze of lights flaring from saloon and dance hall and gambling hell. Overhead, the bonfire stars of Arizona shuddered away from the bedlam of song and yell and curse and groan that spouted up through the darkness.

Spilled whiskey stained the sawdust and spilled blood reddened the whiskey. Men fought over drink or gold or women—or fought just for the fun of fighting.

Women laughed with painted lips, and calculated shrewdly with eyes that laughed not at all. White-faced gamblers spoke briefly from the corners of their mouths, and raked in the gold that miner and railroader and cowboy had salted with the sweat of heart-rending toil and now tossed away with a curse and a jest and a careless shrug.

Silver City boomed defiance to the laws of man and the laws of nature —and got away with it.

"Is she allus as wild as this?" Rance asked a friendly puncher who stood, glass in hand, at the bar beside him.

"Feller," drawled the waddie, "yuh ain't seen nothin'! T'morrer is payday for the mines and the railroad. They're jest tunin' up the fiddles t'night. T'morrer night the orchestra cuts loose!"

Rance drifted from saloon to saloon, listening, watching. He heard and saw plenty, and some of the sounds and sights very nearly put a curl in his black hair; but as the hours of early evening slipped away to make place for the roaring hours of midnight and after, he had learned nothing relative to his quest.

"Hope Pete's havin' better luck," he growled as he trudged up the hillside, where the lights were fewer, the sounds more furtive, and the dives lining the crooked street more sinister.

BUSY with his thoughts, he did not observe the beady black eyes that watched nor the two figures that slipped stealthily along in his wake. There was also a third figure, slim and slight, muffled in a *serape* that concealed its outlines and most of the face beneath the low-drawn brim of a wide *sombrero*.

The third figure, still farther back down the street, saw the two trailers hesitate an instant as if in conference. Then one drifted into a side street and faded from sight. The other sauntered along a dozen paces or so behind the Ranger.

Almost to where the street shacked and tented off into the sage and boulders of the mountainside, Rance paused before swinging doors over which streamed soft light and subdued music. A Mexican in a gay *serape* and silver-crusted *sombrero* bowed and smiled with a twinkle of black eyes and a flash of white teeth.

"*Buenas tardes, senor,*" he greeted. "Will you not enter? Music, the dance, the ver' fine *mescal* and *tequila*—we have them all. The *senor* is most welcome."

"Reckon I might as well," agreed Rance.

The Mexican swept back the doors. "The *senor* speaks the Spanish?"

"*Muy poco.* Very little," returned Rance haltingly. "Why?"

The dark eyes glinted slightly but their owner gave a deprecating shrug. "The songs they are sung in the Spanish," he hastened to explain, "but the *senor* can understan' the music."

"Uh-huh. I don't care much for the words, anyhow. Music is what counts."

"*Estoy muy contento.* I am very glad," murmured the Mexican innocently.

"Huh? What yuh say?"

"I say enter, *senor.*"

Rance walked through the doors, suspicious and alert.

"Tried to trap me into givin' it away that I can sling his lingo 'bout as well as he can," mused the Ranger. "Now why, I wonder?"

CHAPTER VI

Trapped

THE interior of the *cantina* appeared innocent enough. Much more so, indeed, than had others of the saloons the Ranger had visited in the course of the evening.

A single big hanging lamp afforded soft light that did not affront the shadows but pushed them back gently and allowed a soft drifting of them to weave in and out among the swirls of cigarette smoke. A couple of guitars sobbed languorous music. A swift ripple of a girl danced sinuously. Men were seated at small tables, quietly drinking and smoking.

"Looks too peaceful," Rance muttered as a polite waiter led him across the room to a tiny table set beneath a window. "Well, mebbe if I keep my ears open I'll hear somethin' interestin', now they don't think I understand their lingo."

"Glass o' *mescal,*" he told the waiter, purposely giving the soft word a harsh, unmusical sound.

"*Si, senor.*"

"What's that?"

"I say yes, sir."

"Talk American to me!" grumbled the Ranger.

"*Si*—yes, sir."

A figure, *seraped* and *sombreroed,* had entered through the front door. A waiter tried to steer the newcomer to a table, but was impatiently brushed aside with a gesture and a hissed sentence in Spanish. The stranger wandered aimlessly across the room, turned and dropped quickly into the other chair at Rance's table.

Facing the light, Rance could see little more than a glint of dark eyes beneath the *sombrero* brim and a shadowy outline of mouth and nose above the muffling *serape.* He could hardly suppress a start of surprise when a whisper breathed across the table.

"This place is a trap!"

The Ranger's eyes narrowed slightly. He voiced a question that barely carried to the other's ears.

"What yuh talkin' 'bout, feller?"

"Look at the doors."

Rance glanced under his hat brim and his grey eyes narrowed still more. At each side door lounged a man, hand hanging close to revolver butt. There were two at the front door. A group at a larger table sat tense and expectant. Rance caught a glint of knives. His eyes came back to his own table.

"Feller, wheah do yuh stack up in this?"

"I warned you, didn't I?"

"Uh-huh, but why?"

"That doesn't really matter. What are you going to do?"

"Window back of me is big 'nough."

"Barred on the outside."

Question and answer flashed back and forth across the table in whispers inaudible a yard distant. Only a few seconds had passed since the stranger sat down.

"They'll start things moving any minute now," breathed from behind the *serape.*

Rance eased his legs free of the table top.

"We'll start 'em fust," he growled. "Trail 'long with me."

His right hand flicked to one of the big Colts sagging low in their quick-draw cut-out holsters. There was a glint of metal, a blaze of reddish flame and a deafening roar.

The roar was echoed by a jangling crash as the big hanging lamp, two bullets through it, tore free from its moorings and splintered the mirror of the back bar. Darkness, like the inside of a black bull in a tunnel, blanketed the room. Rance's long left arm snaked out, grasped his table companion, and the two hit the floor together as bullets stormed over the table top.

Rance twisted sideways, seized a chair by the leg and hurled it crashing through the window. It struck the bars and bounced back to the floor with a prodigious clatter.

"*Maldito!* They go by the window!" howled a voice.

Bullets clanged against the bars. Yells of warning and advice soared up. Rance, understanding the Spanish words, chuckled inwardly.

"Shoot no more! We kill each other!"

"Someone go to the window and stop them!"

"Ten million curses! Who?"

"A light, quickly! A light!"

"No! No! They will shoot at the light!"

Rance rose softly to his feet and made his way easily and silently across the room, holding his companion lightly by the wrist. He paused where he figured the side door should be and stretched out a questioning hand. His fingers brushed a face.

There was a startled gasp, then the thud of the Ranger's fist on a stubbly jaw. The man who was guarding the door went down like a cowpoke's hopes on Judgment Day.

Rance hit the door with all his weight behind a big shoulder. It splintered open. He jerked his companion through and slammed it shut after him.

"C'mon, feller!" he barked. "We gotta move!"

Inside the *cantina* sounded muffled yells and thudding feet. The door flung open again and the yells were no longer muffled. Nor were the crackling reports of six-shooters stabbing the dark with flame.

Bullets whistled about the fleeing pair or kicked up the dirt at their feet. Rance's companion suddenly cried out, stumbled and went down. Hardly breaking his stride, the Ranger swept the slight form up in his long arms and darted behind a cluster of shacks. He weaved in and out among a jumble of tents and cabins, heard the yelling and shooting fade into the distance. Breathing heavily, he slowed to a fast walk.

"Gotta get this jigger to a light and see how badly he's hurt," he muttered. "If it hadn't been for him they'd have mowed me down 'fore I got hep to what was goin' on. Good! Theah's one of them lanterns-on-a-pole what this *pueblo* calls street lights."

IN the dim glow of the dangling lantern Rance paused. He shifted his burden and peered at the white face.

"Holy crippled crawlers!" he exclaimed.

Somewhere during the hasty flight the big *sombrero* had fallen off. Over the Ranger's arms rippled a cluster of shining dark curls. The muffling *serape* had loosened and slipped down, revealing a sweet red mouth, a small, tip-tilted nose delicately powdered with a freckle or two, and creamily sun-golden cheeks into which a rose-flush of color was creeking back. Rance suddenly realized that the little form he held was slender and slight and deliciously rounded.

Even as he stared his astonishment, long dark lashes fluttered up and through their silken curtain the biggest and softest and loveliest black eyes in the world gazed timidly into his.

With that glance came astonished recognition.

"Gypsy Carvel!" stuttered the Ranger.

"Yes, Gypsy Carvel. They didn't hurt you, did they?"

Rance came out of his daze with a snap.

"No, but yuh're hurt. Wheah'd it hit yuh?"

He peered closer, saw a smear of blood just above one white temple, and brushed back her dark curls. She winced as his fingers touched a slight graze where the creamy skin met the soft hair. Rance sighed deep relief.

"Didn't even crease yuh—jest a bullet burn."

"I—I'm afraid I fainted from fright," murmured the girl.

"Well," drawled Rance, "if yuh was scared, yuh sho' did a swell job of keepin' it covered up."

Questions came tumbling from his lips.

"How come yuh to be in that place? How'd yuh know I was theah? Why—"

The girl slipped from his arms and sprang lightly to her feet.

"I saw men following you. I followed them. One slipped away to tell those in the *cantina* you were headed that way, so they could lay a trap for you. The other watched you go in and then ran off to tell—to tell—someone you were there. Then I went in."

"But—but—"

"I can't tell you anything more," she interrupted. "I'm sorry, but I can't. I was grateful for what you did for me in Mexico and wanted to help you. I must be going now."

Graceful as a shadow among the shadows she drifted away from him, turning into the dark side street. Rance stared after her stupidly for an instant.

"Wait!" he exclaimed. "Yuh can't—yuh mustn't—say—"

A trill of silvery laughter flung back through the darkness, and—

"I hope you liked the saddle. *Hasta luego!*"

Then a swift patter of small running feet, fading quickly into silence.

RANCE drew a deep breath, pulled off his wide hat and rumpled his thick black hair.

Suddenly he slapped the hat back on his head and stared into the darkness. He abruptly remembered that suspicion clamored gravely that the sweet-faced girl who had just left him had assisted a convicted murderer to escape, in the course of which men had died.

"A hell of a peace officer I am!" he told himself bitterly. A slow grin supplanted the frown on his lean face. "By gosh!" he told the nodding street light. "It jest come over me—she didn't say *adios* when she left. She said *hasta luego!* That means good-by—*for a while!* Feller, let's go get a drink and fergit our troubles!"

Rance found Pedro Hernandez in his tiny room near the livery stable.

"Yuh find out anythin'?" he asked the ex-bartender.

"*Si,*" Pedro nodded. "Not much, but something. There are strange men, lately arrived, in the Mexican quarter, I am told by one who lives there. Among them, said she, are *Norte Americanos,* in appearance most evil."

Rance pondered this information gravely, his black brows drawing together over his cold grey eyes.

"It ties up," he mused. "Yuh know, Pete, after Cavorca robbed the Curry bullion train and murdered

the guards, I trailed him for months 'fore I finally dropped my loop on him. I slipped inter Mexico oncet, to his hangout down theah, and tried to snake him out and get him acrost the Line. I saw Americans in his outfit then—plumb salty *hombres* they was, too. Yeah, what yuh found out ties up all right."

For some time he sat silent, while Pedro smoked. Abruptly he straightened up, his thin-lipped, good-humored mouth tightening. In his ears rang the words of the friendly cowpoke in the saloon: "T'morrer is payday for the mines and the railroads!"

"Pete," he exclaimed, "how yuh figger they bring in the money they use to pay the miners and railroaders with?"

Pedro reflected.

"The Tucson stage I would say, *Capitan,*" he hazarded at length.

Rance nodded.

"Figger yuh got the right of it. Nobody's s'posed to know, but of coh'se ev'body does, 'specially them what ain't got no bus'ness knowin'. The stage lays up over night at Burley and makes the trip through Bleached Bones Canyon by daylight. Gets in heah right after noon. Uh-huh, that's it, Pete. Well, I'm gonna pound my ear a hour or two—got a ride ahead of me this mawnin'."

CHAPTER VII

Guns and Gold

IT IS not a nice place, Bleached Bones Canyon. Not only because of its frowning black walls and its foaming white water that ever gnaws hungrily at the narrow strip of trail wandering about between fangs of rock.

Too many terrible things have happened in the stone-cramped gorge that, even at noonday, is always shadowy. There are too many shattered skeletons shimmering whitely, too many rusty stains that look like dried blood, though they are really only iron outcroppings. Enough blood has been shed in there to make the white water run red. Men ride through Bleached Bones Canyon with furtive glances and their chins slanted over their shoulders.

Old Frank Masters, driver of the Tucson stage, was nervous. His glance shifted continually from the trail ahead to the ragged crest of the beetling wall "t'other side of the crik" and back again. From time to time he gazed back along the way they had just traveled. He growled querulously to the heavily armed guards who sat on either side of him.

"I tell yuh theah's a feller been follerin' us ever since we hit this damn hole-in-the-wall. I don't like it!"

"Never saw anythin' yuh did like," grunted lanky Jim Osborne.

Fat, jolly Tim Mooney chuckled. "Responsibility sets heavy on Frankie's shoulders," he piped. "He's allus seein' bandits when he's haulin' payday gold."

"'Sponsibility, hell!" yelped Masters. "I'm 'sponsible for nothin'. I'm hired to drive stage, and that's all. What happens to that theah gold is up to yuh tailbone warmers. Jest the same I don't hanker to get a slug through my gizzard."

"Drivers never get shot," chuckled Tim.

"Hell, no," grunted Osborne. "None of 'em wuth shootin'. Heah's the south end of the canyon, yuh ol' grumble-growler, and nothin' happened."

"Jest the same I got a feelin'," snorted old Frank, "I got a feelin'."

Riding along less than a quarter of a mile behind the stage, Rance Hatfield also "had a feelin'." He was puzzled, too.

"I'da swore they was gonna pull somethin' t'day," he told the black stallion, "and this canyon's the place to pull it. Guess that hunch was a maverick. All open trail tuh town and the bank, now. Well, feller, we had a nice ride, anyhow."

He glanced at the sun slanting down the western sky and quickened the stallion's pace.

The Silver City bank squatted near the north end of the town's principal street. It was a bulky, one-storied building with thick walls, barred windows and heavy doors. A sign on one of the windows read "Closed for the day," but the front door opened as the stage pulled up.

Rance saw the two messengers lug a heavy, iron-bound box into the bank. Peering through a window as he rode slowly past, he saw them heave it onto the shelf of a grated opening. A clerk back of the grating was writing a receipt.

Rance was just about to ride on when the clerk moved slightly, into a shaft of afternoon sunshine pouring through a side window. Rance saw the light glint on hair more golden than the sunshine itself. The clerk looked up, and the Ranger stared into a face as handsome as it was evil.

RANCE hit the ground running and tore through the bank door. Manuel Cavorca, crouching in the teller's cage, saw him coming and greeted him with a roaring gun. Rance's answering shot knocked the iron-bound box sideways. One of the guards clutched at it and it crashed to the floor, outside the cage.

Instantly the building seemed to explode with the thunder of six-shooters. The two guards went down, dead hands clutching their half-drawn guns. Rance hurled himself sideways back of a pillar, his Colts beating a drum-roll of fire. Men boiled out of the open vault, from behind desks, from underneath tables. The Ranger's fire blasted them back from the cages. Outside sounded the shouts and yells of the aroused town.

Manuel Cavorca, calm, collected, barked an order. The back door banged open. There was a clatter of running feet, a thumping in a nearby stable; then the quick thud of galloping hoofs.

Rance dashed out the front door in time to see El Rey careening up a side street, blood streaming from a bullet furrow on one glossy black haunch. The bandits were already a cloud of dust on the southwest trail. A crowd of townspeople were clamoring down the street.

"Get in theah and see what happened to the bank folks," Rance shouted, and set out after his horse.

The stage guards and two bandits were dead. The bank workers were found trussed up in the vault.

"They jumped us right at closin' time," explained the cashier. "We didn't have a chance."

On the floor outside the cages was the payroll money box, its contents intact.

"Wheah's that tall black-haired jigger?" squalled old Frank Masters "If it hadn't been for him they'da got away with it. He blew 'em clean out from 'tween their ears. What a *hombre!* I nev' *seed* sich nerve or sich shootin'!"

"Who was it?" asked the cashier.

"Hell knows," returned old Frank. "If the ornery cuss warn't dead, I'd say it war Doc Holliday."

"But Doc Holliday was an outlaw," protested somebody.

"Uh-huh," agreed old Frank, "an' he was the fightenest hellion and the best man with a six-gun what ever come outa Tombstone, and when yuh say that, theah ain't no more to say. Mebbe that big jigger war his ghost!"

The stage driver described Rance

as he remembered him, and from that description Captain Morton himself would not have recognized his star Ranger.

For which Rance was duly thankful. His least desire was to become conspicuous in Silver City—just yet. To do so would be to make his work all the more difficult. He was bitterly disappointed at the outcome of the bank raid. True, he had blocked the robbery and saved the big payroll; but Cavorca had escaped. To advertise the part he, Rance, had played in the affair would be to give Thomas and Patton more ammunition to use in their fight against the Rangers.

"They'd beller like steers with the colic 'bout Cavorca slippin outa the loop," Rance assured himself. "They would make folks forget all 'bout the payroll and it'd end up by the Rangers bein' blamed for them two pore devils of guards gettin' drilled. Nope, the only thing what'll do any good is Cavorca hisself as Exhibit A, either stuffed or on the hoof."

He listened to the discussion raging in saloon and dance hall over the possible identity of the mysterious gun-fighter. When pressed for an opinion he replied vaguely.

"Mebbe that stage driver imagined he saw a feller," he suggested. "Mebbe the guards scared 'em off 'fore they was killed."

The idea spread. People began to wonder if it mightn't be the true solution of the mystery. Rance was well content to let it go at that.

Pedro Hernandez, however, suffered from no illusions.

"Ai, Capitan," he enthused, "it must have been a fight! Such a fight as *el Capitan* fought in the *cantina* at Paloa. Why did you not take me with you, *Capitan?"*

"Yuh're a darn sight more good to me circ'latin' 'round and findin' out things," Rance told him. "Learn anythin' more?"

"Only this," said Pedro. "The night before the attempt at robbery there was a *senorita,* a most lovely *senorita,* asking questions in the Mexican quarter. Finally one of the strange men met her and talked with her. Talked with great earnestness, shaking his head often. *La Senorita* wept, I am told, but the man continued to shake his head and she went away; where to, no one knows."

"You know who she was?" Rance asked casually.

"No, *Capitan,"* replied Pedro, "I did not see her. I only heard."

After Pedro had left, Rance sighed deep relief. "Well, anyhow she was not in on that stick-up," he breathed thankfully. "Looks like she even didn't know it was bein' pulled off. Looks like she figgered Cavorca was up to some dev'lment, though. If it ain't hell—a girl like her wasted on such a wuthless sidewinder!"

The thought left him depressed and gloomy.

"I'm going out and get me a drink. Two drinks," he decided.

TEN minutes after leaving his room Rance decided that the friendly puncher in the saloon the night of the Ranger's arrival had known what he was talking about, even though he missed the time by twenty-four hours. The orchestra was going full blast tonight.

Payday had been postponed because of the robbery attempt, and the disappointed workers were making up for lost time.

"All the mines is closed down," a bartender told Rance. "Theah ain't enough men left in the railroad camps to bile a pot o' beans, and a flock of punchers who took three big trail herds nawth last month jest got inter town. Looks like it's gonna be the biggest night Silver City ever seed."

It was. That night Silver City reached such heights of madness

and plumbed such depths of evil as she never achieved before or since.

The very Gila monsters and rattlesnakes of the desert at her feet would have died of poison had they sucked in the venom of that night.

Silver City's streets ran red with blood and lust and passion and greed. Gold flowed in steady streams across the bars. The tables of the gamblers groaned under its weight. The women of the dance halls clutched it greedily in the early hours of the night, and flung it away in wild abandon before the red dawn flamed upon the mountain tops.

Men died with spilled whiskey staining their shirt fronts and the paint from hot lips staining their souls. The gold was crusted with sweat and black with dried blood. Tobacco smoke and gun smoke swirled in the air. The gleam of silver flashed answer to the gleam of steel.

The death cry of a poor devil with a knife in his back and a clutching hand in his pocket was drowned by song roared from a throat that would be bubbling with blood before the first sun shaft kissed the desert.

"Whew!" whistled Rance Hatfield as he fought his way into a bellowing saloon. "If all I owned was this heah town and hell, I'd sell her and live in hell!"

From saloon to saloon he went, and ever the mad pace grew madder and the wild night wilder. The bartenders no longer pulled corks—they smashed the necks of the bottles and gushed the raw whiskey over the splinters into glasses with hands already pawing around them. The roulette wheels spun faster and faster. Men shoved their winnings back onto the red or the black without counting them, roared exultantly if they won again, shrugged and grinned if they lost. Dice clicked, cards whispered one against the other. The stiff white collars of the dealers were no longer white nor stiff. Their faces, formerly white and cold as the collars, were flushed and mottled and streaming sweat. Only the silk and tinsel of the dance halls seemed to gleam the brighter as the hands screeched around the clock.

"Funny how much better lookin' a dance hall girl gets after you've looked at her a few times through the bottom of a whiskey glass!" Rance chuckled as he swung a slim, flaming-haired partner across the sanded floor.

SUDDENLY the Ranger stiffened. A face had drifted past, a swarthily handsome face topping a tremendous spread of shoulders.

"What's the matter, cowboy?" asked the girl.

Rance ignored her. Some hidden monitor in a corner of his brain was clamoring for attention.

"Now wheah've I seen that jigger before?" he muttered. "Why'd he give me such a start?"

He followed the big man with an intent gaze. The other glanced straight into the Ranger's face. Recognition flamed in his eyes, he whirled about and Rance saw a jagged, livid scar slanting down his neck. Tomaso Fuentes!

A mad thrill shot through the Ranger's brain. Tomaso Fuentes! Not even Cavorca himself was more wanted by the Arizona authorities. Fuentes was red to the elbows in American blood. His frequent raids across the Border were things of terror and horror. Once let the Territory of Arizona lay hands on him and his conviction and execution were swift and sure. Capturing Fuentes would be a Ranger triumph as great or even greater than the capture of Cavorca.

Rance hurled the girl from him and bored across the room, shoving cursing dancers aside, driving straight for "*mi gran general,*" who

was diving just as straight for the outer door.

Rance jerked his gun, but dared not shoot. There were too many men and women in the way. That did not bother Fuentes, however. He slewed sideways; flame gushed from his low-held hand.

A girl screamed, a wild shriek of agony. A man went down, coughing and spitting. Rance gritted his teeth.

"The hyderphobia skunk! Just let me line sights on him—jest once!"

Fuentes shot again, and Rance felt the wind of the bullet that knocked the back-bar mirror into a thousand splinters. Fuentes knocked a girl down, clubbed a man with his gun barrel and tore the swinging doors off their hinges going through. Rance hit the board sidewalk a split second later.

Up the street was a swirl and eddy where Fuentes ripped the crowd apart, his big shoulders and his flailing gun barrel clearing a path for him. The angry revelers, closing in his wake, hampered the pursuing Ranger.

Men struck at Rance, others sought to seize him, not knowing what it was all about. He tore free from their clutching hands, fended their blows as best he could and grimly stuck to Fuentes' trail.

Fuentes had gained a long lead, but now the crowd was thinning. Rance risked snapping a shot or two over their heads with the only result that his quarry ran the faster.

Up the long slope of the mountain toward the mines, where the lights were fewer, the street practically deserted. Ahead loomed the gaunt buildings of the great Alhambra mine. To the left were those of the Golconda. To the right straggled ramshackle structures of smaller diggings.

Rance knocked Fuentes' hat off with a whining slug. The fugitive ducked frantically, swerved to the right and darted into a shaft housing. Rance heard the watchman's challenge, then a groaning yell, a clash of levers and the whine of moving machinery. He barged the door open and leaped into the dimly lighted building.

Directly in front of him yawned the mine shaft. High over his head the huge barrel of an old-fashioned windlass, its speed controlled by crude but efficient grippers, turned slowly. In the gloom of the shaft a wire rope swayed and jerked.

"Sidewinder started the cage, jumped in and's goin' down the shaft!" Rance panted.

He leaped to the lever that controlled the descending cage. Before he reached it the rope ceased swaying. The cage was at the bottom of the mine.

"Blazes!" swore the Ranger. "'Fore I can get that contraption up and down again he'll have time to dig a hole through to China. Heah goes nothin'!"

MEASURING the distance across the shaft, he gathered himself together and leaped. He caught the rope with one hand, slipped, dangled, got another grip just as his fingers tore loose. He wrapped his legs around the swaying cable and went down hand over hand through the black darkness.

He hit the cage top with a crash, lost his grip and rolled off to the ground, the breath almost knocked out of him.

A gun blazed a yard-long lance of fire and a bullet screeched through the space a standing man would have occupied. Rance jerked his gun, sent two bullets smashing at the flash and rolled frantically aside. An answering slug knocked rock splinters into his face.

Deafened by the roar of his own guns, he dimly heard the thud of

running feet. He leaped erect, tripped over a projecting timber end and went sprawling.

By the time he regained his feet once more the quick thudding had died away in the distance. The gloomy passages of the mine were silent save for the soft drip of water and the groan of timbers settling under the terrific compressing force of the mountain resting upon them.

For an hour or more Rance prowled through the underground galleries, fruitlessly. Fuentes had found either a snug hiding place or another exit. Rance was inclined to think the latter. Finally he made his way back to the shaft.

The cage had been drawn up, but a few yells brought it down again. The watchman, with a sore head and a sawed-off shotgun, greeted Rance when he reached the surface. He peered closely at the Ranger, the ten-gauge ready for business.

"Wheah'd yuh come from, and wheah'd that dirty greaser go?" he demanded.

Rance told him as much as he thought necessary. The watchman commented vigorously and profanely.

"Chances are the horned toad found the tunnel openin'," he concluded. "Yeah, theah's one; hits the air over clost to the Alhambra workin's. Mebbe he'd been heah b'fore and knowed wheah to look. We work a lot of Mexicans. What's good fer this gun-barrel haidache?"

The first kiss of dawn was blushing the mountain tops as Rance made his way back down the slope. A merciful darkness still shrouded Silver City crouching like a drunken hag over a broken gin bottle.

Sodden figures lay in the streets. The sobbing moan of a dying man quavered up from somewhere among the shadows. There were huddled forms under the gambling tables, beside the drenched bars, stark in blotchy doorways. Bits of tawdry tinsel and torn silk littered the dance hall floors. The hanging lamps smoked and guttered, ghastly in the welling torrent of golden light from the east.

A vile stench tainted the air.

But clean and sweet and lovely with an unearthly loveliness, the desert stretched its shimmering arms to the dawn. The great mountain blazed rose and red and scarlet and gold as its purple sleeping robe slipped slowly down its majestic form. Water leaped silver and white. A whisper of wind danced across the crags and the sand.

A bird sang—and it was day!

CHAPTER VIII

Death Strikes

PEDRO was waiting in Rance's room, pacing the floor with excitement. He burst into voluble Spanish.

"Hold on! Hold on!" cautioned the Ranger. "Take it easy, feller, I can't make head or tail what yuh're talkin' about."

Pedro gulped, ceased his prancing and returned to English.

"The sheriff and his posse. They pursued Cavorca."

"Yeah, I know," said Rance. "Fat chance they had o' catchin' up with him."

Pedro gestured expressively.

"Thees sheriff, he not so dumb," he said. "He attempts not to catch up with Cavorca. Instead he rides to the west, circles the Canyon Trail north on it, figuring that Cavorca would turn into the Canyon Trail and ride south."

"Not so dumb, that," agreed Rance. "Did he meet him?"

"Yes and no," explained Pedro. "Cavorca he not dumb, either. He

have scouts riding ahead. They see the sheriff and his posse. They warn Cavorca. The bandits ambush the posse and kill or wound several. Not enough, however. Now the south mouth of Dead Man's Canyon is closed to Cavorca. He dares not ride back north."

"How'd yuh learn all this, Pete?"

"The sheriff send a man here for food and help. Everybody drunk. Not yet has help been sent to the sheriff."

"Uh-huh, and while they're foolin' around, Cavorca'll squirm out some way," growled the Ranger. "C'mon, Pete, yuh and me is ridin'."

SEVERAL miles north of Mexico the Canyon Trail enters the gorge from which it gets its name. The inner walls of Dead Man's Canyon are steep and rocky, clothed with dense chaparral and manzanita. From the ragged rims the ground falls away abruptly in almost straight-up-and-down slopes. The canyon, in fact, splits the crest of a mountain whose precipitous sides are its outer slopes.

Night was not far away when Rance and Pedro entered the gorge. El Rey had not fully recovered from his flesh wound and Rance forked a sturdy brown pony hired from the livery stable. The Mexican rode a bay.

"Heah that?" exclaimed the Ranger. "They're shootin' it out in theah, Pete."

Faint firecracker explosions tossed back and forth between the rock walls, punctuated by duller thuds.

"Six-shooters and rifles both goin'," deduced Rance. "The sheriff musta got tired of waitin' and decided tuh close in on 'em."

Pedro nodded and for some minutes the pair rode in silence. Rance turned to his companion, jaw tight, eyes gleaming under his black brows.

"Pete," he said, "yuh and me is gonna bust up the party and give the sheriff the break he's needin'."

"*Si, Capitan,* but how?"

"This way. Cavorca will be worried 'bout his back trail. He'll know if the sheriff gets help it'll come this way. Chances are he'll have scouts posted to warn him if another posse is comin'. He don't dare lead his gang back this way with the sheriff campin' on his tail. Once in the open country he's sunk, and he knows it. I'm bankin' on the scouts gettin' rattled if they see or heah anybody comin' from the nawth. You and me is goin' in hell-bent-for-leather, shootin' and yellin'."

"*Si Capitan,* a good plan."

"Uh-huh, if it works. If it don't—well, hope El Rey gets a good new boss!"

The popping of pistol shots grew louder. Rance loosened his guns, gathered the reins in his left hand. Ahead loomed a projecting buttress of rock where the canyon curved.

"All right, Pete, heah we go!"

Spurs drove home. The horses shot forward, stormed around the turn.

"Come on, fellers, heah they are!" whooped Rance.

Pedro gave a yell that would have put an Apache buck to shame. The guns of both let go in a crackling fusillade.

Answering shots from the canyon side kicked up puffs of dust at their feet. There was a startled yelping amid the chaparral, then a clatter of hoofs.

"It's workin'," exulted Rance. "Shoot, Pete, shoot!"

On they swept, iron hoofs striking showers of sparks from the rocks. Rance stuffed shells into his empty gun while Pedro took potshots at the fleeing scouts.

"Ha!" shrilled the Mexican. "*Capitan,* look!"

The hillside was suddenly aswarm with frantically fleeing men. They rose from behind boulders, darted

from clumps of manzanita. Some tried to urge their horses up the steep slope, others held their hands high in the air and howled for mercy. Puffs of smoke zoomed up from the canyon ahead. A deep voice bellowed orders.

"Sheriff's tellin' his men not to shoot them what gives up," Rance shouted.

More hands went up. Rifles and revolvers clattered on the rocks. The bandits had had enough.

"Maldito!" shrieked Pedro. "Cavorca! Cavorca!"

RANCE saw the leader break cover at the same instant. Straight up the slope he urged his magnificent golden sorrel. Beside him rode a slim little figure on a bright roan. Rance groaned as the posse in the canyon sent a volley after the fleeing pair.

The slender rider beside the golden-haired bandit suddenly threw up fluttering little hands and pitched headlong from the saddle.

"God!" breathed the Ranger.

Manuel Cavorca glanced down at the crumpled little form in the mesquite. For an instant his grip seemed to tighten on the reins. Then a feeble hand gestured frantically toward the saffron-flaming crest of the gorge. Cavorca bent low over the sorrel's neck and sent him leaping up the boulder-strewn slope.

"The dirty sidewinder!" grated Rance. "Left her! Hightailin' it tuh save his own wuthless hide."

"Pete," he barked, "don't let him cut back this way. Block the nawth end!"

Up the slope went the chunky brown pony, snorting and slipping.

"If I only was forkin' El Rey!" groaned the Ranger.

The brown horse was doing the best he could, but the sorrel gained steadily. A lucky smooth stretch gave the pony a momentary advantage, but the sorrel had almost reached the crest when he was still a hundred yards behind.

Cavorca twisted in the saddle. His blue eyes glinted along a pistol barrel. Rance saw the puff of smoke and heard the thud of the bullet reaching its mark at the same instant.

Down went the brown horse, dead with hardly a struggle. Rance kicked his feet loose and hurled himself free. He struck the ground hard, but was on his feet in a single rolling bound, just in time to see Cavorca vanish over the crest.

"Gonna ride down the outer slope —he'll never make it," gasped Rance, floundering and stumbling up the hill.

But Cavorca did. Rance reached the lip of the canyon as the sorrel went down a final hair-raising stretch, "sittin' on his tail." Cavorca turned, waved a derisive hand and vanished amid the thick growth.

Slowly, haltingly, the Ranger walked back into the canyon, his tortured eyes dreading what he knew they would all too soon see. The old sheriff panted up to meet him.

"Cavorca get away?"

Rance nodded dully. The sheriff wiped his damp forehead with a red handkerchief.

"His gal's down theah," he gestured, "by that clump of mesquite. Dyin'."

With a face of stone, Rance Hatfield walked to the mesquite clump. Under a blanket a slight figure writhed and moaned. The Ranger hesitated, then strode to the blanket.

"God-a'mighty!"

With incredulous gaze he stared into a darkly lovely face from which two great hate-filled black eyes glared up into his. Lips that had been rose-red were now grey with pain. The dying girl hissed a sentence in Spanish.

Rance knelt beside her.

"Senorita, who are yuh?"

The dark, agonized eyes blazed. "Me, I am Teresa. *Perro!* Did you keel my man?"

"Yore—yore man? Yuh mean Cavorca?"

"*Si,* Manuel, my sweetheart. I am hees woman."

Slowly the Ranger shook his head. "Cavorca got away," he replied softly.

Joy replaced the hate and suffering in the black eyes. "*Madre de Dios, gracias!* Now I die happy."

Rance bent lower, voiced a question. "Teresa, who is Gypsy Carvel?"

Hate flamed in the dark eyes once more.

The girl levered herself up on stiff arms.

"Geepsy! She ees—"

Blood gurgled in the slender throat, choking the words. She coughed with a dry rattle. The tense arms relaxed.

Rance caught her and eased her gently back upon the blanket. For a long moment he stared into the half-open eyes. Then he softly drew a corner of the blanket over the quiet face.

CHAPTER IX

Out of the Storm

"WELL, we rounded up the gang, anyhow," said the sheriff as he and Rance rode back to Silver City together.

"Uh-huh," grunted the Ranger pessimistically, "and Cavorca got away. Like cuttin' the haid off a tapeworm and bottlin' the body. Haid goes right on growin' 'nother body."

"You figger Cavorca'll get 'nother outfit t'gether?"

"Shore he will, and he won't waste no time 'bout it, either. He'll be out tuh even up t'day's score in a hurry."

The sheriff looked worried. "Mebbe he's got his belly full of Silver City," he offered hopefully.

Rance was not impressed. "Mebbe," he said, "but the chances are he'll figger he jest got a onlucky break this time—which is 'bout the truth of things, come to think on it. Chances are he'll still cal'late Silver City's easy pickin's."

They rode in silence for some time. The Ranger broke it at last.

"What's botherin' me most right now, sheriff, is Tomaso Fuentes. that slash-necked sidewinder didn't ride all the way to Silver City, takin' chances on the Border Patrol pickin' him up, jest to hoof it in a dance hall. He's stewin' up some kinda kittle o' hell or I'm a sheepherder. I sho' wish I knowed if he left town."

Rance found Silver City suffering from a headache, but busy. The thunder of the stamp mills shook the air. Buildings vibrated to the faint boom of blasts set off far beneath them in the timbered galleries of the mines. Ore wagons jammed the streets, their drivers lifting the hair from the mules' backs with profanity that caused the air to smell of sulphur. Carts loaded with portly silver bricks stuck in the ruts and were cursed and levered out.

"One thing the outlaws don't have no luck stealin'," a mine official told Rance. "We cast them bricks in two hundred-pound weights. They don't go so well on the back of a hoss."

The days six-sevened into weeks and another payday approached, but nothing was heard or seen of either Manuel Cavorca or Tomaso Fuentes. Nor of the dark-eyed girl Rance now thought of as Gypsy Carvel.

"Anyhow," he sighed in relief, "it wasn't her what shot Old Man Clanton back theah in the Cochise co'hthouse. Them bandits we caught all 'grees *that* was Teresa. If any of 'em knows anythin' 'bout Gypsy they won't spill it. I got a notion that big

tough *hombre* what told us all t' go to hell is hep to somethin'. His eyes sorta squinted when I said her name, but theah's 'bout as much chance of gettin' anythin' outa him as theah would be of gettin' a cowpoke inter heaven."

One thing still worried the Ranger greatly. "Even if she wasn't in on the co'hthouse raid, it was jest about as bad if she hired Fuentes to do it."

Thinking along these lines, he asked Pedro a casual question.

"For what did *la senorita* make the bargain with *un gran general, Capitan?*" replied Pedro. "Why, it was like this: *la senorita* owned a *chacra*, a small ranch, in our Mexican state of Sonora. She suddenly desired money, most urgently, it would seem. She gathered together all her cattle into a trail herd and started driving them to market. The government, on some pretext seized that trail herd. *La senorita* was in despair. Her need for money was great. She endeavored to hire Tomaso Fuentes to take that herd from *el Presidente's* men and run it into Arizona. It pleased Fuentes to do so, for he hates *el Presidente Diaz*, and he greatly desires *la senorita*. The rest of the story, *Capitan*, you already know."

Rance solemnly shook hands with Pedro, much to the Mexican's astonishment.

"All clear as a hatful of mud now," he told himself exultantly. "Easy to see what she wanted money for. Cavorca had jest so much time to appeal his conviction to the higher co'ht, and appeals cost money. Cal'late Fuentes didn't even know why she wanted the money. Snakin' Cavorca outa the co'hthouse was Fuentes' own notion, I bet a *peso*. He needs Cavorca in his rev'lution bus'ness. But why in jumpin' johnjiminy is she so int'rested in that sorrel-topped sidewinder?"

There came a night of wailing wind and lashing rain. Rivers cascaded down the mountain sides. The desert soaked in the moisture and glimmered ghostily with a light of its own making. Silver City's streets were an ankle-deep churning of mud. Everybody who could remained indoors.

Pedro Hernandez was not one of these. He scuttled into Rance Hatfield's room after midnight, dripping water and excitement.

"*Capitan,*" he chattered, "*la senorita* rides this night to the meet with Manuel Cavorca! Hasten, *Capitan*, hasten!"

"Hold on," exclaimed Rance. "Wheah'd yuh learn all this?"

Pedro explained volubly. "My friend in the Mexican quarter she have a brother. The brother he drank with the man who bore the message from Cavorca. The man boasted that he was Cavorca's *hombre*, told of the message, after my friend had smiled upon him. She is a wise *nina*, my friend."

"Did she find out wheah they was gonna meet?" demanded Rance.

"Assuredly, *Capitan*. They meet in Shadow Canyon. Do we ride now, *Capitan? Viva!*"

CHAPTER X

Trail's End

SHADOW CANYON is a box canyon. Several cattle trails run into it, for there is good grass and water in Shadow Canyon. Only one trail runs out of it, a trail that zigzags dizzily upward along the western wall, barely wide enough for a single horse, winding around bulges and juts, with always the swirling black water of Shadow Creek hungrily beneath it. One looks into the mouth of Shadow Canyon from a tiny mesa half a mile

distant. The mesa slopes rather sharply to the canyon floor.

The rain had ceased and the sun was casting golden spears into Shadow Canyon when Rance and Pedro reached the lip of the mesa. The Ranger peered intently toward the mouth of the gorge.

"Pete," he exclaimed suddenly, "theah's somebody ridin' down theah —*two* somebodies!"

"Three," corrected the Mexican; "a third comes from the south."

A GRIM drama was in the making at the foot of the mesa, but as yet neither Rance nor his companion realized it. They did not remain ignorant for long.

"That's Gypsy theah in the canyon mouth," Rance muttered. "She don't see that jigger ridin' 'round the grove toward her. Is it Cavorca? Don't look like him from heah. Theah he goes outa sight behind the trees!"

Pedro exclaimed sharply.

"*Capitan*, the man from the south rides a golden horse."

"That'll be Cavorca," growled the Ranger, "but the other one—sufferin' sidewinders! It's Fuentes!"

The second rider had swept into view again, scant yards from where the girl sat her pony. Rance saw her whirl her horse into the canyon.

She was too late. Fuentes reached her side before the pony got fully under way. He reached out a gorilla-like arm, swept her from the saddle and flung her across his own pommel. Into the canyon thundered his tall grey horse, swerved to the left and began climbing the narrow trail that wound over the north wall of the box.

Down the lip of the mesa Rance urged El Rey, Pedro crashing along behind him, but losing ground at every stride. Cavorca was forgotten. All Rance's energies were centered on overhauling the straining grey horse that crawled flylike up the slanting trail.

"We gotta get him, feller! We gotta get him!" prayed the Ranger.

Across the foot of the mesa flashed a golden shape, into the canyon and up the trail. Cavorca, too, had seen and was racing to the rescue.

"I nev' thought that hellion could ride in shootin' distance of me and be safe," Rance groaned, "but theah he goes! He ain't safe from Fuentes, though!"

Fuentes had turned in the saddle. From his hand darted a puff of smoke and a flicker of pale flame. Again and again he fired, knowing that his pursuers would not dare shoot in return for fear of hitting the girl he held helpless in front of him. Rance gritted his teeth as Cavorca swayed in the saddle, but the outlaw kept riding.

"Wasn't plugged after all! He—damnation!"

The golden horse stumbled, went down. Its scream of pain and terror struck the Ranger's ears, a thin ribbon of sound, as it crashed over the edge of the trail.

Hurled from the saddle like a stone from a sling, Manuel Cavorca rushed down and down to the racing river seventy feet below. He struck the water with a sullen plunge and vanished.

Rance Hatfield, thundering up the dizzy trail, jerked El Rey to a staggering, plunging halt. Guns ready, he leaned in the saddle, peering at the rushing white water. But Cavorca did not reappear.

"Musta hit a rock," muttered the Ranger. "Guess that settles Manuel. Anyhow, Pete'll take care of him if he comes up. Get goin', hoss, we got another sidewinder to hawgtie!"

Fuentes was pushing his horse cruelly, raking its bleeding flanks with his spurs, pounding it over the head with his gun barrel, but the giant El Rey gained at every bound.

"Yuh're doin' it, feller, yuh're doin' it!" praised Rance. "Now if we jest get a break!"

Around a bulge careened the black horse.

Less than fifty yards distant, Fuentes was aiming his gun.

Rance saw the puff of smoke, heard the scream of the slug that knocked his hat from his head. Fuentes' lips writhed back in a curse, the barrel of the big gun dropped down again, steadied.

"He won't miss twicet!" panted Rance. "Faster, feller, *faster!*"

El Rey overhauled the grey as if he were standing still. Fuentes, his face a livid mask of evil, held his fire.

"Waitin' until he's sure!" muttered Rance, crouching low on El Rey's neck.

Fuentes' eyes gleamed, narrowed. Rance could see the muscles of his gun arm tense.

There was a sudden flash of a slim little hand. It struck Fuentes' arm just as the gun blazed, knocking it up.

The bullet kicked a puff of dust from the canyon crest.

"Good girl!" whooped the Ranger, rising in his stirrups.

The grey horse snorted in terror as El Rey's snapping teeth reached for his flank. He shied against the cliff side and at that instant Rance Hatfield left the saddle in a streaking dive. His reaching arms wrapped about Fuentes' huge shoulders and held.

The cinches gave way under the strain and both men and the girl crashed to the rocky trail.

Over them stormed El Rey, still trying to get his teeth into the grey gelding.

Crouched against the cliff, her head ringing from the fall. Gypsy Carvel stared with horror-filled eyes at the death struggle raging on the lip of the dizzy gulf.

She saw Fuentes, foam flecking his bestial lips, sink his teeth in the Ranger's arm. She saw the spurt of blood as an iron hard fist hammered his jaw and tore the yellow fangs from their hold. She saw the gorilla arms wrap around Rance's waist, tightening until his ribs crackled with the strain.

Over and over rolled the battlers, kneeing, kicking, striking. Grimly silent they were, save for the sobbing of the breath from bursting chests.

Breast to breast, glaring eye to glaring eye, fighting to the death for that for which men have fought since the beginning of time—a woman!

Under Fuentes' chin Rance cupped his locked hands, jerking his knees

up at the same time. He put forth all his strength, broke the other's hold and rolled free. Catlike, both men were on their feet, circling warily.

Fuentes leaped, his huge right fist whizzing in, irresistible as a cannon ball. Rance weaved aside, stooped and seized the Mexican about the thighs.

Groaning with the strain, he hurled Fuentes over his head.

There was a wild scream of terror as Fuentes cleared the lip of the trail and shot down, his arms and legs whirling in the air. Up from the rocks fanging the water drifted a crunching thud!

As he peered at the motionless, broken body a hundred feet below,

a mighty exultation thrilled Rance Hatfield.

His work was done—better than well done!

"Now Jim Thomas and Walsh Patton c'n jest squawk their haids off," he growled. "Cavorca gone to make chuck for the fishes! Fuentes busted up like a yearlin' what's gone through a sausage grinder. Feller, the Rangers ain't got a thing to worry 'bout. They'll be on the job when these heah hills are rubbed down level with the ground!"

As he stepped back from the edge, he felt a touch on his arm. He turned to face Gypsy Carvel.

"You—you are hurt!" quavered the girl.

Rance grinned at her through puffing lips. "Nothin' to make a fuss over. Yuh all right?"

"Yes. But you are bleeding."

"Jest scratches. Be forgot in a day or two. Guess it's all over, *senorita.*"

The girl drew a quivering breath. "My—Manuel?"

"River got him," Rance told her soberly. "I never saw him come up."

Tears welled in the dark eyes. Her red lips trembled. But there was a note of relief, almost of gladness in her voice when she spoke.

"He went clean!"

"Yes, ma'am, he died like a man."

For a long moment they looked into each other's eyes.

The big eyes met his steadily.

"He was my cousin," she said. "We were children together—more like brother and sister than cousins. I loved him and tried to save him."

"I know," Rance said softly.

There was a rush of color into her soft cheeks. She glanced at him timidly through the silken curtain of her lashes, and Pedro Hernandez, urging his foaming horse around the bulge, grinned hugely.

"*Ai,* but when the hand of a friend plucks the rose—*that* is different!" he chuckled.

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GOLDEN GUNS

Carl Jeffers Deals a Lone Vengeance Hand as He Greets Ornery Coyotes of the Rangeland with their Own Medicine!

By TOM J. HOPKINS

Author of "Guns of Hate," "The Gun Juggler," etc.

CHAPTER I

Out of the Past

SILAS KEYSTONE looked up from his brooding over the letter to glower angrily at the stranger who had walked into his office. His oddly slanted eyes still glowed with cupidity. For that letter meant money, stolen gold, to add to his large and ill-gotten hoard. His lean, pale face was cruel, his lips twisted as he demanded:

"Who are yuh, an' what d'yuh want?"

As he said it Keystone's eyes shifted from the doorway of his darkened store to the safe. He was alone in the big building, and mighty glad that safe was closed and locked. It held things that might hang Silas Keystone, and some others.

"I'm figurin' to sell yuh this gun," said the stranger, smiling a little. He was of average height, but powerfully built. A cowboy, from his dress. A dangerous fellow, from his easy airs and glinting eyes in the face of trouble. "Sell it fer ten thousand dollars!"

The gun was flipped around, butt foremost, in a lean hand that handled it with skill. A pearl-handled Colt, gold inlaid.

"Yuh crazy fool!" Keystone said it angrily. "A gun—a common gun, an' yuh're askin' ten thousand dollars for it!"

The stranger chuckled softly and moved the butt forward to where Keystone could see the inlaid handle. The gold, gleaming against the pearl butt-plate, was made to represent a steer's horn.

Automatically, at the move of the gun, Keystone dropped his eyes to the butt. His face twisted into a tense mask. His lean shoulders hunched slightly and his fingers itched to get at a gun in the half-open drawer of his desk. He kept his wits going; he would have to kill this stranger, soon—

"I never saw that gun before!"

Keystone did not seem to sense the admission in his quick words, that he *had* seen it, recognized it. The gun in the desk. His hands were slipping toward it. He stopped the move, as the stranger spoke on, and spoke compellingly:

"Yuh're a liar, a thief, a murderer!" And the cowboy grinned as he said it. "Yuh know the gun. Yuh know there are two of 'em. Yuh know *who* owned 'em. Yuh buried him, with the guns, on a ledge in a little canyon down in the Huachucas!"

Silas Keystone seemed to freeze. Ten years ago, and the brutal murder of Jack Burgess was coming back. But who was this fool? Not a relative—Burgess had left only

A Quick-Trigger Complete Novelette

There came a harsh command: "Steady, all! Not a move!"

that white-haired old wife. A helpless thing, according to Silas Keystone. Not a fighting woman—not worth killing, as he would have to kill this fellow.

The stranger laughed, talked on:

"A long trail, Keystone. It took me a year after I found this gun, and its mate, to locate Mrs. Burgess, and then you. Ten thousand yuh took from Burgess. And to keep on livin', Keystone, it's goin' to cost yuh just ten thousand dollars!"

The stranger spoke flatly, as a man would speak who knew he was telling the truth. He still held the beautiful gun butt foremost. Keystone's hand slipped swiftly over the top of the desk. Down, and up with a pistol rising. He was a fast, deadly shot. Sure of himself, even fighting for his life as he was now. Sure he would kill — Keystone choked, straightened in his chair.

The stranger had deftly flipped the gun around in his hand. As it settled butt down in the palm of his hand, the gun spoke; once, twice.

The explosions were deafening in the small office. They drowned the single shot from Keystone's gun, as his fingers closed convulsively. Smoke surged and billowed in front of the stranger's eyes. There was a clattering sound behind the smoke. A thudding fall.

Stepping sideward, the stranger saw Keystone on the floor. The gun had dropped beside him. There were two bullet holes in Keystone's chest, close to his heart, or through it. He was dead.

OUTSIDE, distantly, there sounded an excited shout. Another. But the stranger was cool, unhurried. He stepped forward, took the letter Keystone had been reading and pocketed it. He did not know what was in the letter, but he was far from the end of his strange trail. Anything might help him, now.

Feet running up outside, feet that would carry curious men. Men who would shoot down the killer of the town's most prominent citizen. The stranger grinned a little as he leaned forward and did a most amazing thing. On Keystone's body he laid the very gun he had been killed with.

A moment later the stranger was a shadow in the dark, deserted store building. Men were gathering at the rear of the building, close to the barred door that led into Keystone's private office. A shout arose:

"Keystone—what happened? Are yuh hurt?"

A quick run carried the stranger across to one wall of the store. Every move had been planned that afternoon. A ladder was moved from its place beside some high shelves, to a position beneath a small window.

Up the ladder went the swift-moving figure of the stranger who still smiled as he thought of the dead Keystone. Into the small window, then. A swift kick sent the ladder rolling back along its little tracks. The window was closed behind the stranger.

Outside, he slipped along a shed roof, chuckled silently at the sounds below him as the crowd tried to force the barred door behind which lay Silas Keystone's body—and the gold-mounted gun.

Along the roof, a leap to another. A porch on the rear of the small hotel. Somebody shouted—had he been seen? A leap, and he was inside his own room, shutting the window behind him.

Somebody was yelling in the street:

"I saw him—on the porch—ducked into a room! This way!"

The mutter of talk, now, arose in the alley.

Carl Jeffers chuckled a little. What if he had been seen slipping into a hotel window? They couldn't recognize him as the man who had

killed Keystone. He had the other gun, but not where it could be found at this time. Danger? What the heck? You took that chance when you tried to help a nice old lady!

The voices still sounded in the alley outside. A thumping. Somebody was trying to climb up on the roof. Carl Jeffers tensed. He slipped to the door of his room, listened. Not a sound. He opened the door, stepped quietly into the deserted hall, and shut the door softly behind him. If he could get into the lobby, among the loafers there—

As he moved toward the head of the stairs, Jeffers took the letter out of his pocket, glanced swiftly at it. He swore softly.

"Mebbe good—mebbe bad!" he said to himself.

He shoved it back in his pocket as he walked quietly down the stairs into the lobby of the Twin Antlers Hotel. But the words of the letter were talking in his brain:

"I'll be there Wednesday, on the night stage. The girl is with me. Will tell you and Remsen the scheme when I see you."

It was signed, simply, "Donnelly." And Remsen, Joel Remsen, was the man Carl Jeffers planned to use the other gold inlaid gun on. Who was Donnelly? And the girl—and the scheme?

Jeffers shivered a little. It could not be—that Donnelly!

CHAPTER II

An Accusation

THE lobby of the Twin Antlers Hotel was a large, but rather shabby room. Carl Jeffers had taken a room there two days before. He had made no explanation of his being in the town of Springdale. Just kept silent, and let those who would puzzle decide he was a cowboy loafing until a job showed up.

Now, after supper, the lobby had a dozen loafers. Two men, cattlemen, were talking in one corner, their backs to the room and their booted feet cocked high against the wall. Three cowboys were kidding a waitress through the still open dining room door. Several others lounged about in chairs, smoking, talking. And out in the wide main street of town the dim outlines of a stage and four heaving horses showed.

As Jeffers stood by the desk where the cranky looking old man served as clerk, two people were coming out of the stage and walking into the hotel lobby. Jeffers stiffened a little, relaxed. It was a man and a girl, arm in arm.

Jeffers' mind flashed to the letter in his pocket; would that be Donnelly, the dangerous one, and the girl?

Jeffers got a good look at the girl. She was laughing at something the man had said. Just as she had once laughed and looked through those grey eyes at Carl Jeffers.

And even as Jeffers tried to turn away, tried to get out of sight, the girl saw him.

"*You*—here!"

The girl laughed softly as she said it. She moved forward to meet Jeffers, slim hand outstretched to greet him with a firm, almost mannish handshake.

Jeffers took the hand, other things forgotten as he stared again into those grey eyes. That smiling, well-tanned face, topping a slender and tall figure almost his own height. All the natural grace and beauty of an outdoor girl were hers.

Suddenly the slim hand was twitched out of Jeffers' grip. He flushed at the move, realizing he had been holding her hand and silently staring at her. She laughed gently,

obviously without anger. Then, half turning, she spoke:

"Father, here is the man I told you about."

The man who had come in with her smiled slightly without any softening of the harsh, rugged outlines of his face. He too had grey eyes, but they were set in a pallid face. A face that somehow seemed never to darken despite the hours the man had plainly spent in the open. A burly, heavy-set man of about fifty, but looking and acting years younger. He was dressed in a dark suit, topped by a black Stetson, and wore his boot tops inside his creased trousers.

"My father," the girl said, turning to Jeffers. "I told him how you helped at the stage station in Colorado, two months ago. But—I don't even know your name!"

"Carl Jeffers," was the answer, as he shook hands with the big man. "And yores?"

"Howdy, Jeffers!" was the quick answer in a crisp voice. "The name's Donnelly—Donnelly and daughter."

JEFFERS' face was a mask before his thoughts. Donnelly—and daughter. Colorado, the notorious Dan Donnelly? That girl—he had thought so much about her for two months now! Was she the daughter of the notorious Dan Donnelly? The man whose reputation for cunning had spread over three states, whose guns were always ready to shoot it out with any who doubted him or his ability to keep clear of the law?

"Glad to meet yuh," was all Jeffers said.

As Donnelly turned to the desk to ask about rooms, the girl began to talk lightly. About the trip, the range country on the way down into New Mexico. Hot and dusty, but the cattle looked well, fattening for the fall beef shipments. Evidently a range-bred girl.

But Jeffers was thinking about the letter in his pocket, taken from the dead Keystone. He had tracked Keystone and Remsen north into Colorado, back to Springdale.

And Colorado was Donnelly's country. Had the man had anything to do with the murder of Jack Burgess?

Jeffers wanted to get away. But wanted still more to stay and talk with the girl. Donnelly turned, said:

"All right, Mary."

Running feet outside and the crash of the doors swinging back stopped whatever Donnelly was saying. An excited, gasping man plunged in, skidded to a quick stop. A man of about fifty who was dressed slightly better than the average cowman would be. A choking, excited man whose weak face showed plain fear as he cried out:

"Donnelly! I—yuh—" Joel Remsen gasped and choked, began again: "Silas Keystone—murdered! Just now—somebody who left J—"

Joel Remsen choked again, seemed to realize he was blurting out, in his panic, things that should not be spoken aloud. Donnelly took two swift steps, covered the distance between the two in a second. But in that second Carl Jeffers had time to wonder, to realize that Remsen recognized the gun left on Keystone's body, had started to tell Donnelly about it.

"Calm down, Remsen!" Donnelly's harsh voice was commanding.

The crisp words stiffened Remsen, seemed to bring him out of his panic. Donnelly took him by the shoulder, almost shoved him along to the back of the lobby. There they stood, twenty feet from anyone, and Remsen talked in swift, low whispers.

Mary Donnelly turned, faced Jeffers with a curiously dismayed look.

"Why, Silas Keystone was a friend of father's!" She shook her head. "How dreadful!"

Jeffers said nothing, just slid his hand into his pocket and drew it out with tobacco and papers. As he rolled the smoke, the lobby doors opened again, and through them came "Wild Joe" Pipkin, the town marshal, and another man wearing a star.

Neither of the peace officers spoke, just strode across the lobby to join Remsen and Donnelly.

Somebody followed them, stood in the doorway staring about. From the open door a gust of wind, cool and fresh, blew across the lobby. Blew, and blew something white across the floor.

Carl Jeffers smiled, talked idly to the girl. Yes, murder was terrible. But it was a rough country, and men had to die some time. With the words he watched the shifting paper go right up to Donnelly's feet as the man talked.

With steady eyes, untrembling hand in his pocket as though searching for a match. Several pockets, and he knew the letter he had taken from Keystone's body now was lying at the feet of the man who had written it.

"Light, cowboy?" said a dry voice.

Jeffers turned. It was the man in the doorway, who now let the doors swing shut and came in. He, too, wore a badge. A lantern-jawed fighting man, a deputy sheriff. Jeffers puffed his smoke, thanked the man, and looked again toward Donnelly and the others.

Donnelly had the letter, was reading it. With unchanged expression Donnelly whispered for a moment to Remsen and the two peace officers. They left him as he and Remsen began to talk. Pipkin went to the front door—his companion to the dining room door. As they reached the two doors, Donnelly and Remsen suddenly drew their guns, and stepped sideways to cover the stairs.

All exits from the hotel lobby were covered, then, and Donnelly's voice boomed out, loudly:

"Steady, all! Not a move! The man who murdered Silas Keystone is right here in this room!"

CHAPTER III

"Put Down that Gun!"

DONNELLY'S words froze every listener in the lobby. Not all of them knew of Keystone's death. And only Jeffers, the peace officers, and Remsen knew Donnelly. But the man's words and manners held all. Held them stiff and tense, as they saw each exit from the big room covered by a man with a drawn gun.

Carl Jeffers alone moved. He dropped his cigarette, stepped on it, and then stood motionless with hands hanging at his sides. His one gun was holstered fairly low on his hard thigh; not tied down in the fighting man's way. But Jeffers knew that holster. It was stiff, boarded cowhide—and thoroughly greased inside. The gun slid out of that holster, when needed, with the speed almost of light.

"Pipkin!" Donnelly spoke again, from the stairs. "Search them all, yuh know what tuh look fer!"

And as the town marshal moved obediently to the nearest man, Donnelly left Remsen at the stairs and strode straight across the lobby to Carl Jeffers. His gun was drawn, held slightly raised as he walked. His eyes, cold and steely grey now, were fixed on the untroubled face of Carl Jeffers.

Donnelly was sure of himself. He had handled worse situations than this, often. And he was in a grim humor. Keystone, and the deal they were working together, meant a lot to Donnelly. Remsen meant more. And Donnelly knew that golden gun

had a mate, sensed the other gun might be used on Remsen soon.

"Jeffers!" Donnelly snapped his words harshly. His voice and manner were forceful and domineering. "That letter came from this direction! Looks like you might be the murderer of Silas Keystone, 'cause that letter was taken from him. Who are yuh, Jeffers, and what yuh doin' here?"

"That letter, or whatever it might be," was Jeffers' calm answer, "might have blowed in the door, when this feller held it open."

He jerked his head, casually, toward the silent deputy sheriff who still stood nearby. The lantern-jawed deputy said nothing. His pale blue eyes were fixed, seemingly, on Jeffers' face. A very intent stare, it was.

Jeffers wondered, had the feeling that the man was trying to place his face in memory. Was this deputy the man who had seen him swing across the porch?

"Mebbe!" agreed Donnelly grimly. "But—who are yuh?"

His gun was rising slightly as he spoke. He waited a second. No answer. The gun snapped up into shooting position, and Donnelly took a step closer to Jeffers.

"Answer me!"

Jeffers did, in a calm voice; but it was not what Donnelly expected, or wanted.

"Put down that gun!"

Donnelly went white-lipped. He was used to dominating every situation, and all men. His thumb was easing back the hammer of the big Colt. He was facing a half-smiling man who was not afraid, but did not attempt to draw. A man who spoke again, quietly:

"Put it down, Donnelly," said Jeffers. "I don't reco'nize yore right to take over a peace officer's job! And I don't talk much, in front of any man's gun!"

For several seconds the thing held in balance. Donnelly was ready to kill, in his cold rage. A big man, a powerful man with much influence; a man who was thoroughly aroused.

"Put it down, Donnelly," Jeffers spoke again, smiling this time. "Put it down, and I'll tell yuh anything yuh want to know!"

SLOWLY, a look of admiration came into Donnelly's face. Mary, who had stood stiffly, motionless, relaxed slightly. The gun was lowered, holstered, and then Donnelly said:

"You got nerve, Jeffers." It was a grim compliment. "Yuh'd be mighty dangerous, on the wrong side of a fight! Sorry I got excited, but Keystone was an old friend of mine. Remsen, too."

Jeffers nodded, laughed softly.

"Well, now we're all friends again," he said. "Like I told yuh, my name's Carl Jeffers. There's plenty people around Prescott, or Tucson mebbe, that'll tell yuh who I am. I sold the Bar H last year to a Mexican outfit when my water holes dried up. Took the cattle south to them, an' been lookin' fer new range since."

Donnelly nodded slowly. Had Jeffers been watching the deputy sheriff he would have seen a sudden light glow in the man's eyes. But he was not.

Pipkin came over, shrugged.

"Didn't find it, Mister Donnelly," he said.

Donnelly swore under his breath. Jeffers jingled his room key, spoke half mockingly.

"Don't know what yuh're a-huntin', but yuh're welcome to search my warbag in the room. Also, yuh'll find my black hull at the feed corral. It's got a hair-braided headstall on it, a Las Cruces bit, an' spurs t' match. Don't know what it's all about, but yuh're shore welcome to take a look-see!"

"Mebbe we will!" Donnelly grinned a little thinly. "But I'm bettin' four ways we don't find a thing that don't belong there!"

He laughed. A great deal of meaning might be read into those words, by a suspicious man. And Jeffers had to be suspicious, now. But he simply chuckled, raised his hat to Mary.

"Can I go out now, teacher?" he asked.

It was dry humor, but a few laughed. Nobody said anything as Jeffers turned and walked out of the door. Then, following him, he heard Donnelly's grim words.

"I'm Dan Donnelly, an' I'm sayin' now—we'll get the man who killed Silas Keystone."

JEFFERS chuckled inwardly as he walked down the street. Maybe! But the man was dangerous, fully as dangerous as he had heard Donnelly to be. The job was looking harder each moment. Up to Donnelly's appearance it had looked easy. Killing Keystone had thrown the necessary panic into Remsen to make him easy to handle. But with Donnelly to back him, Remsen might not be so easy to handle. Getting back the money for Mrs. Burgess, who needed it so badly, began to look anything but simple.

There was a big saloon and gambling house on the next corner, and Jeffers lounged against the outer wall of it. Before him passed the night life of a wild little cowtown. Cowboys and ranchmen, in for grub and whatever trouble they could stir up. Some Mexicans, *vaqueros* of the best type, drifted by. A few women were on the streets. One came out of a store with a big bolt of calico under her arm. A squalling youngster followed, yelling for more candy.

Jeffers swore softly, brooding over what had happened. If he hadn't pulled that letter out of his pocket! And the girl—heck, he had dreamed about locating her, after this little job was done! And there she was, daughter of the notorious Dan Donnelly.

His jaw set. He was not going to be stopped. He had promised Mrs. Burgess to get that money. Up to the time he had found those guns in a canyon, near a bullet-riddled skeleton, he had not known anything about Jack Burgess or his wife. But murder was there; a poverty-stricken, white-haired widow who needed money.

Back toward the hotel, then, and a sudden shift into some shadows in an alley. Jeffers waited. Two men came by. He followed them down a side street, straight to the feed corrals. It was easy, in the darkness, to follow. Impossible, however, to get near Donnelly and Remsen as the latter saddled a horse and mounted. Remsen then rode off toward his ranch, and Donnelly walked back toward the hotel.

Letting the man pass him, Jeffers puzzled for a time. Then he, too, headed back for the hotel. He wanted to get at Remsen immediately, throw a scare into him and try to bluff the money out of the man under threat of killing him. But it would be folly to follow him now, so openly. Too easy to prove he had left immediately after Remsen. And Remsen, riding alone, might be a trap; might have following men to kill any who came near him.

In the hotel lobby Jeffers looked neither to right nor left. He strode swiftly across the big room, up the stairs. His fists clenched a little, but he made no sign he had heard words behind him:

"Mister Jeffers, please—"

It was Mary Donnelly. It hurt, to stride on up the stairs unheeding. But Carl Jeffers actually was afraid for once in his wild, fighting life.

Afraid of weakening, under a grey-eyed girl's fascination.

It was one in the morning when Jeffers slid out the window of his room. He dared not get his own horse to go out to Remsen's ranch, and he had decided to risk something more, among all the risks he was taking. That of stealing a horse to make the trip, and returning it before daylight.

Not a hard thing to do, in the late hours when most of those in the saloons and dives were drinking and gambling. A good, fleet-looking black was selected from among four others tied near a dark alley corner.

Jeffers rolled and staggered his way, in assumed drunkenness, up to the horse. A moment later he was riding down the dark alley. A block, and he had the horse on the run for the outskirts of town and safety.

And an hour later Carl Jeffers left the stolen horse to creep on foot toward some dark buildings looming against the night ahead of him.

Remsen's ranch. What lay there for him?

CHAPTER IV

An Appeal

IT took about five minutes' silent, wary prowling about the big K-R ranchhouse to locate Remsen's room. Jeffers swore softly under his masking bandanna as he noted the room's windows opened toward the big bunkhouse. That made it dangerous, for twelve K-R riders slept in that bunkhouse, Remsen and the Chinese cook sleeping in the main building.

Those things, and others, Jeffers had learned in town. The K-R ranch, owned jointly by Keystone and Joel Remsen, had twelve more riders scattered at various points over their big range. But they did not count at the moment. Remsen ran the ranch; Keystone, until that night when he had died, had run the big store and banking end of the partnership.

It seemed better, to Jeffers, to risk going through the house than entering Remsen's room from a window. For the windows could be seen from the bunkhouse, and some cowboy might catch a glimpse of Jeffers' shadowy figure if he entered that way. So Jeffers turned to the front door, silent and ghostlike.

The big door was not locked, and that made Jeffers wonder. Had they laid a trap for him? He shoved it open slowly, with a gun muzzle. A gun drawn, not from his holster, but from the waistband of his overalls. As the big door swung silently open, Jeffers took his hat in his left hand and shoved it around the edge of the door. Just as though a man were peering in, before entering.

But nothing happened.

The slanting rays of the moon crept into the room, gave an eerie look to the old furniture as Jeffers made his silent way through it. He noted, before going into the hall back of the big living room, just where the windows were, where another room opened from it.

Down the hallway, then. Two doors, one into an office, the other into Remsen's bedroom, showed there. A moment of dead silence, waiting, tense with the danger that confronted him. Then Jeffers silently pushed open the door that led into Remsen's bedroom. He stared in, alert, listening.

Not a sound, except the slow breathing of the sleeping man. Remsen lay flat on his back, slack-jawed, hair tousled, one fist clenched on his chest outside the blankets. An unlovely sight.

Silently, Jeffers crossed to the bed. The slanting rays of moonlight reached it from the big windows. He

leaned over Remsen, pressed the muzzle of the gun against the man's chest. Pressed it slowly, steadily, with increasing weight. It wakened Remsen without startling him into crying out or sitting up suddenly.

Then, a choked, gasping moan came from Remsen. He saw the masked face. Saw the pearl-handled, gold-mounted gun!

"Quiet, Remsen!" Jeffers spoke softly but compellingly. His voice was muffled, disguised. "I'm the man that killed Silas Keystone—because he wouldn't pay ten thousand dollars for the mate tuh this gun!"

Remsen moaned, seemed unable to speak. Jeffers had judged the man well. He was a coward—deadly, dangerously cunning; but only when backed by a man of courage. Or with strong odds in his favor.

"Keystone was a fool, a stingy fool," said Jeffers, laughing softly. "Yuh ain't a fool, are yuh, Remsen? Not that kind of a fool, afraid to buy a golden gun for ten thousand dollars?"

Remsen moaned again, found words to whisper:

"My God! Don't kill me, man! I'll pay—I told Donnelly this'd happen. But he said I'd be safe out here, with my men!"

"Yuh ain't safe any place now, from the golden guns!" Jeffers wanted to laugh at the man's cowardly panic, but did not. There was too much at stake, for fooling now. "There's only one way to save yore life, Remsen; buy it back, with ten thousand stolen dollars! It goes to Jack Burgess' wife. Keystone has paid for the murder—now *you* pay back the money!"

"I'll pay—yes, I'll pay!" A look of cunning was coming into Remsen's eyes. "Meet me at the bank in the morning—"

Jeffers laughed softly, mockingly.

"Don't think I'm a fool! Yuh'll send the money to Mrs. Burgess, at Tucson, by express. When I hear she has it, yuh'll be safe."

"Anything, anything yuh want," said Remsen. He still saw a chance. Donnelly was in town; he could talk to Donnelly. He moved his hands slightly, and the golden gun stiffened him once more.

"Don't move—I kin still kill yuh."

"Yuh'll lose the money if yuh do!"

Jeffers shook his head, tried a chance remark to learn something.

"No! I still have another man to work on, haven't I, Remsen? Still got Donnelly. He was with yuh, wasn't he?"

But Remsen made no answer. Jeffers tried again, but found the man gone into a stubborn silence. He shrugged, said sternly:

"Remember—yuh're on the edge of the grave until I hear Mrs. Burgess has ten thousand dollars, Remsen!"

THEN, with a curt order to keep silent, Jeffers took Remsen's guns from the chair near his bed. He backed to the window, still threatening Remsen with the golden gun. Out the window, then dropping Remsen's guns there, and a wild straight dash for his horse. Jeffers knew instinctively what Remsen's reactions would be. And he was right.

"Help!" Remsen's voice rose into the silent night. "Help! Boys! Jack—Shorty—get yore guns!"

There was a sudden yell from the bunkhouse. Remsen shouted again. A rifle roared, roared once more.

A bullet whined wildly past Jeffers as he swung into the saddle. Another. The cowboys, dazed at first, soon got their eyes open. Bullets slapped and thudded close to Jeffers and the snorting black horse as the beast wheeled, raced off.

Back at the bunkhouse came shouted orders, yells for horses. Flashes, roars of rifles. But Jef-

fers was low in the saddle, racing swiftly off into the darkness. He did not shoot back. The cowboys might be, probably were, honest fellows in their way. Just obeying the boss' orders. No sense in shooting them—or letting them know where he was by his gun flashes.

Out into the night, then, and a wild ride off to the right, away from town. A sweeping run down through a canyon, up onto a ridge. Shouts and yells in the distance. Several gun flashes. Jeffers grinned, swung his horse around for the ride back to town. An hour later he was hiding the golden gun in a creek bottom near town, just where he had had it hidden before going to Remsen's ranch.

That done, he rode into the silent, dark town, and slid out of the saddle. He loosened the cinch and turned the horse loose.

FIVE minutes later Carl Jeffers, feeling rather tired but cheerful, was dropping off to sleep in his own room. Morning, however, and what he learned then, found him not quite so cheerful.

The first thing he learned from the smiling waitress in the dining room was that Remsen had come to town. The second thing, also from the girl, was that Remsen and Donnelly had offered a reward for the killer of Silas Keystone. A nice reward—just ten thousand dollars!

After the waitress left to get Jeffers' order, and while those thoughts were churning in his mind, he kept his eyes down, brooding. Donnelly. Donnelly must have been with Keystone and Remsen. Or at least it seemed so from the letter, his backing Remsen now, and joining in the reward.

A voice broke into Jeffers' thoughts, brought him wheeling around in his chair, to stand up.

"Good morning! Didn't you hear me last night or did you deliberately run away from me?"

Caught by surprise, Jeffers flushed a little under his tan. Then he grinned cheerfully.

"Sure, Miss Mary," he replied. "It must've been somebody else yuh spoke to. Me, I'd've busted a leg gettin' to yuh if I'd heard yuh."

Mary stared at him a moment, her grey eyes intent. Somehow, Jeffers masked his brain, afraid almost to think. She seemed to read him with those cool grey eyes. Prettier each time he saw her. And Dan Donnelly's daughter—or was she? She didn't look like him. But if she wasn't his daughter, what was she doing playing his games for him?

Might even be playing one of his games now, thought Jeffers. For, over her shoulder, he could see two men standing in the door of the dining room. Both men were armed, both men were staring at Jeffers. One was the deputy sheriff who had seemed to recognize Jeffers. The other was Dan Donnelly, listening to what the deputy said. A trap? Was Mary there to interfere with Jeffers' gun when the fight started?

"I wanted your help—still want it," said Mary. "Can I sit down, talk to you while we eat?"

"I—" And there Jeffers stopped, his eyes on the door.

"You've changed," said Mary, coolly. "I thought I knew you in those short hours we had together—just talking like old friends. You were someone I liked, felt I could depend on if ever I needed help. I need it now—and you won't even listen to me."

Jeffers was sick, mentally, at her words. They stung like fire. But could he believe them? His eyes did not meet hers; dared not. For the deputy and Donnelly were walking straight toward Jeffers now. And Jeffers caught the deputy's words:

"I know it's him!"

CHAPTER V

Conspiracy

CARL JEFFERS shifted his eyes just once, from the two advancing men. There were only the waitress and Mary in the dining room. The waitress was clearing a table back near the twin doors into the kitchen. Mary was close to Jeffers, but not in line with the two men—who stopped now, four feet away.

Donnelly nodded a greeting with an almost expressionless face.

The lantern-jawed deputy said, "Howdy," and that was all.

"Nice day," said Jeffers, calmly; "or it will be, after I've had some coffee an' eggs."

"It isn't too early tuh talk," said Donnelly. He stood flat-footed, eyes on Jeffers' face. But he spoke to the deputy: "Yuh're sure about Jeffers, are yuh, Murphy?"

"Yeah," said the deputy. "It's him, all right!"

He waited for Donnelly to speak, but Donnelly seemed to be thinking, debating over what move to make next.

Jeffers had those scant seconds to decide just what he would do. Let them jail him as the murderer of Silas Keystone and perhaps get out of it some way later, and still be able to help Mrs. Burgess? That seemed best, even though he risked hanging.

Shooting it out with them would mean death there—or be read as a confession that he was the man who had shot Keystone.

And then Donnelly spoke steadily, evenly.

"Jeffers, last night when I threw a gun on yuh about that letter business, I said yuh'd be a dangerous man on the wrong side of a fight. Well, Murphy here's been telling me things that make me still surer of that."

Donnelly grinned a little, a thin-lipped grin which might mean almost anything. Then, when Jeffers still said nothing, he went on:

"Says he recognized yuh! Certain shore of it—an' I don't think he's wrong."

"I ain't," said Murphy. He hitched his gunbelt slightly, left his thumbs tucked into it on either side.

Jeffers grinned a little wickedly. It looked like the preliminary move to shooting. Maybe they weren't going to arrest him—simply kill him. Well, they'd have to move fast!

With the thought, Murphy spoke again, and his words left Jeffers' brain a little dizzy for a moment:

"Yeah," said Murphy. "He's the feller, all right. Says he owned the Bar H an' sold it, in Mexico. Well, he ain't told yuh nothin' like I know about him. He didn't drive his Bar H herd south — it was driven for him. Mexican rustlers! He went after 'em, lone-handed. Nobody knows, not even Kosterlitsky an' his *Rurales,* what happened down there. But there was some dead rustlers, an' Jeffers comes back with good gold money for his stolen herd!"

Jeffers laughed his relief.

"Sounds like it must've been two-three other fellers, not me," he said jestingly.

"It was you, Jeffers," snapped Murphy. "I seen yuh in Nogales. An', Donnelly, if yuh want a fightin' gunman, here he is!"

"Yuh said it!" Donnelly grinned, a trifle grimly. "I want a gunman, a man who kin take care of himself an' somebody else. I'll pay a hundred a week, with five weeks shore, fer that man. An' ten thousand dollars to him if he gets the jasper who murdered Silas Keystone! Gets him, not alive—but dead!"

Donnelly stared hard at Jeffers as

he finished. He waited for an answer, but did not have to wait long. Jeffers gave it at once, for he had been thinking fast while the two men had talked in turn.

"Sorry," he said, "but I ain't hirin' out as a killer."

Donnelly started to argue, almost angrily. He was not a man accustomed to being denied. It seemed he would not be denied now, but he did not know Carl Jeffers.

"No argument, Donnelly." Jeffers interrupted with the flat statement. He did not look at Mary, just said again, "No argument about it. And here comes my coffee and eggs."

Donnelly stiffened, and Murphy shrugged, said nothing. And into that almost explosive silence came words from Mary.

"Come, Father. I think we can leave now!"

JEFFERS sat down slowly, saw them go. His face was expressionless as he ate slowly, methodically. Ate, and wondered; had he done the right thing? He shrugged that thought aside, decided he had done the one thing he could do—keep himself clear of other things until he had settled this deal for Mrs. Burgess. If he hired out to Donnelly, probably to guard Remsen from Jeffers himself, they could watch him each minute. And perhaps that was just what the cunning Donnelly planned.

His breakfast over, Jeffers went outside the hotel and sat down on the "liar's bench," to smoke. He sat there alone for half an hour. Two cigarettes. Then Remsen and Donnelly appeared, strode diagonally across the wide street. They went into the little building that housed the bank. They stayed there for a time, then came out.

Jeffers watched them leave the bank, come back the width of four stores—and enter the express office.

"Looks like he sent the money," was Jeffers' inward comment. "Or do they just want me tuh think so?"

Ten thousand—for Mrs. Burgess who needed it so badly. Or, ten thousand for the killer of Silas Keystone. It must be a big deal that Dan Donnelly was in on. He was not the man to pay out ten thousand dollars needlessly—or to satisfy a grudge. Bullets for a grudge, yes, fired from Donnelly's own gun; but not money.

"Thinkin' what a fool yuh were to turn down money?" said a dry voice. It was Murphy, the deputy sheriff. He sat down, grinning a little, and rolled a smoke.

Jeffers decided he liked Murphy, and grinned back without answering. They sat silent for a time, not feeling it necessary to talk about nothing. Remsen and Donnelly came out of the express office, passed the hotel, and went into the alley that led to Keystone's big store. Jeffers heard Murphy say:

"That buzzard, Donnelly, now; he shore looks like the kind that gets what he wants. Except you!"

"I'm easy tuh git—sometimes."

"Uh-huh, when yuh want to be," retorted Murphy. "I seen lots o' broncs like that—easy to git, an' shore hard to handle when they *is* got!" He laughed, winked, and said: "Well, I'm headin' fer the office to see if there's any sheriffin' to be done this mornin'."

He rose, stretched.

"What's the matter with huntin' for that gent who killed Keystone?" Jeffers said. "Ten thousand reward!"

"That's Pipkins' job," said Murphy slowly. "I'm jest a rustler hunter. I'd like that ten thousand—but the man who was good enough tuh kill Silas Keystone is too good tuh git caught."

And with that cryptic remark, he walked away leaving Jeffers wondering just how much Murphy knew.

Rising, Jeffers walked around the block. He passed saddlers, teams; ranchers and cowboys. Most of them were in front of Keystone's big store, horses tied, people moving in and out. Jeffers went in, bought some tobacco, a new shirt. He went out, after seeing the office door was shut.

Down the alley, then, as the shortest way to the hotel, Jeffers passed, slowly, the opened window into Keystone's office. Remsen, Donnelly and a clerk were there. Donnelly's voice was saying:

"The safe ought tuh be opened. Remsen, as his partner, kin order it blown open if the combination can't be found."

Jeffers was out of hearing then.

Five minutes later, looking out the window of his room, Jeffers saw Donnelly and Remsen leaving the store. Seemingly, they were on their way back to the hotel. Jeffers left his room door slightly ajar, waited inside. There was just a chance that Donnelly and Remsen might pass that door, be saying something. But the move failed. They did not come upstairs.

Jeffers went down into the lobby and saw Mary talking with Donnelly and Remsen. He heard Donnelly saying:

"Changed our plans, Mary. We'll drive out to Remsen's ranch today, but come back here to spend the night. There's somethin' we got tuh do. Tomorrow, we'll move out t' the ranch—"

Jeffers went by them and out into the street. There was nothing for him to do the rest of the day but wonder if Remsen had really sent that money to Mrs. Burgess. She would write him when it came, but that would take three days. Just wait, wonder what was going on at the ranch, and why Remsen and Donnelly were coming back to town to spend the night.

Something to do with the safe? Remsen was Keystone's partner. Suppose they found the combination, and got into the big safe? They'd talk, together, alone in that small office behind the dark store, deserted at night. Or, would they be alone? Would Mary be there, plotting with them?

It made Jeffers sweat softly, inwardly, and stiffen himself against thoughts of Mary and what she might have meant to him had things broken better for them. But the store, that night— He'd have to risk getting in again the way he had made it before; over the roofs in darkness and through the window. Risk it to learn what he could about Donnelly, the girl, what their schemes were, and how it would affect Mrs. Burgess and her money.

The more Jeffers thought of what might be talked about that night in Keystone's office, the more certain he became that he would try and overhear the talk.

"And I'll take the gun," was his final decision to himself. "Mebbe I'll need it."

SUNSET found Jeffers, after an early supper, walking through the town toward the creek bottom where he had hidden the mate to the gun he had placed on Keystone's body. It was a quarter mile from town, but he walked rather than have his horse seen and perhaps followed. Easier by far to hide a man than a horse and rider.

Lights were glowing back in the town as dusk came and Jeffers slipped through some willows in the creek bottom. He climbed a fifteen-foot cut bank and sat down at the top for a few moments. There was no sign of anyone. Not a sound but those faint ones from the distant town.

Rising, Jeffers walked ten feet away from the edge of the cut bank.

He stopped, stared about him, and still saw no sign of anyone near. He stooped swiftly, felt under a flat rock and drew out a small piece of canvas. Wrapped in it was the well oiled and smooth-working gun with its gold-mounted butt.

Jeffers stood for a moment after he put the canvas back under the rock. He shifted the gun in his hand, weighed it. A beautiful, well made and perfectly balanced weapon. Easy to handle and aim. His thoughts were cutting his heart, then.

If he hadn't found that gun! If he hadn't located Mrs. Burgess and tried to help her, he never would have met Mary and loved her—to learn that she was Donnelly's daughter.

"The golden gun," Jeffers spoke softly, in a low voice. "And what if I have tuh kill Dan Donnelly with it?"

A choked, muted sound brought him wheeling about, every nerve and muscle, every cell of his brain reacting instantly to danger. A figure, crouched, was at the crest of the cut bank ten feet away. Near enough to hear his words. Hear his confession, about that gun!

Jeffers dared not risk a shot at the moment. A quarter mile is not far. He leaped straight at the crouching figure, saw it rising. He clubbed the golden gun, raised it on high as he jumped. One blow—could he get it in before the man shot him? One of Donnelly's men, of course, who had followed him. Donnelly did suspect him.

Could he get the man?

A half-choked cry of surprise, fear, sounded. Jeffers could not stop his leap. It was too late. The figure reeled back, went plunging over the cut bank. Jeffers followed. He half-rolled, reached the bottom, and came to his feet sick with emotion. He jammed the golden gun into his waistband, stooped and knelt beside the motionless figure beside the rock it had struck in that fall.

Jeffers stared down, helplessly, at the closed eyes and bruised head of the one who had followed him and heard his words. It was Mary.

CHAPTER VI

Gunplay

ONLY a quick inspection was needed to show Jeffers that Mary had struck her head severely in that sudden fall. She was breathing lightly, unevenly—might even be dying from concussion.

Darkness was about them now. Jeffers gazed around, saw the lights of town. A doctor—there. And also Keystone's office. Donnelly and Remsen, in that office. Perhaps going over things that might help Jeffers—and things that might clear him of murder in case he were caught.

But, Mary could not be left there. Even though she was Donnelly's daughter, perhaps in on his deals, she could not be left there.

It took Jeffers twenty minutes to carry Mary back to town and locate a doctor. Twenty minutes of holding that slim and lovely girl tight to him. In his arms. But a limp, unconscious Mary who, when she came to, would be able to testify that he had killed Silas Keystone.

Ten minutes of waiting in the doctor's parlor, and the man was back in the room, stethoscope hanging around his lean neck. He grinned at Jeffers' worried look, and said:

"She'll be okay by morning. My wife's with her. I gave a hypo, and she'll rest nicely."

"Thanks, Doctor," said Jeffers, rising and putting on his hat. "Got some things tuh take care of, but I'll likely see yuh in the morning."

Five minutes after that, Jeffers was in his darkened room, staring out

the window. A light showed behind the curtains of Keystone's office. Already there, were Donnelly and Remsen. Jeffers' face was a grim mask. He stepped out onto the porch, went across it.

No one in the alley.

The rest was easy, just retracing his way across the roofs until he crouched by one of the upper windows above the shelves in Keystone's store. It was the window he had used before, and it had not been touched.

It opened to his hand, and he crept in, held himself partly on the small window frame, partly on the top shelf. A faint grey light crept in shafts from the several windows. Nothing moving, just the strange jumble of many things that a big cowtown store had to have—including coffins.

Unseen back in the darkness was the door into the office. Behind that door were Donnelly and Remsen.

JEFFERS swung down, holding by his hands to the top shelf, His feet found purchase on a shelf below. His right hand dropped, caught a shelf, his left followed it. His feet dropped to the floor softly. He crouched, eased the gold-mounted gun in his waistband, moved noiselessly toward the rear of the store.

A crack of light showed now, as Jeffers neared the door. Before, it had been masked by the rear counter. A three-quarter-inch slit at the bottom of the door. And the mutter of a voice came through that slit.

Down on his knees went Jeffers. The words lost the muttering sound, became clear; words from grim Dan Donnelly. He was venomously cursing the man who had killed Silas Keystone. A steady, even flow of cursing that damned the killer to eternal torment for interfering with his plans and putting Donnelly in fear of jail—or a noose about his neck. And Remsen joined in the cursing at times.

Drawers slammed. Something was dropped heavily on the floor. Something banged on the desk top. Then:

"I tell yuh, Remsen, we've got to git that safe open!" Donnelly's words rose slightly higher. "We've searched his house, searched this office, and can't find the combination t' the safe. We'll have to blow it open tomorrow! I know Keystone! He's kept things—too many things! He was that kind, damn him; he kept things that kin hang us both—jest to keep me from putting anything over on him. And now he's dead—gone. Gone where they can't git him—an' we're left! We've got to git that safe open!"

Remsen cursed, whined something about "—that deal — with Keystone dead—kin we do it?"

Jeffers couldn't catch all the words; just those few.

"Shore, shore!" came the steady voice of Donnelly. "We'll put it over—easy. Isn't Mary right here, with us?"

That stung Jeffers, so that he did not hear the next words from Remsen. But he did catch Donnelly's sharp answer:

"Tuh blazes with the other golden gun an' whoever has it! He can't stop this deal! He won't git a cent from us. We'll git him, kill him! That dummy package—"

Donnelly's voice stopped on the word. There was a dead silence then. Tense, heavy with danger. Jeffers drew his gun, wondered if they had heard him, somehow. Then, Donnelly's voice came. Grim, raging, this time:

"Remsen! Yuh tricky devil, I kin read it in yore face! Yuh fooled me! By Gawd, yuh fooled me! *Yuh sent the money!*"

"Don't kill me!" Remsen moaned, frightened. "Put that gun down, Dan, please! It was the only way!"

Remsen's words tumbled over each other as they came from his lips. "I had to send it to the woman! That fellow was goin' tuh kill me! I *had* to send the money!"

Jeffers was grinning to himself, now, in vast relief. So, the money really had gone to Mrs. Burgess! The money rightfully hers, stolen from her murdered husband!

"Yuh crazy idiot!" Donnelly was having a hard time keeping his voice from becoming an enraged shout. "Don't yuh see? That was a confession! They've got yuh now! Yuh've as good as admitted yuh murdered Jack Burgess!"

Donnelly evidently had lowered his gun, for Remsen's voice was stronger now.

"Yuh, too! Yuh did it, yuh fired the first shot! We all shot him—that was the agreement! Each one of us three helped to kill Jack Burgess! Yuh'll hang for it, too, if anything goes wrong!"

"Damn yuh!" Donnelly's voice was hoarse. "Let me think!"

A dead silence, then.

JEFFERS half rose from his crouch. Well, the thing was settled. Mrs. Burgess would have her money. He could go. Now, for a wild night ride before Mary came to and told what she had heard him say. Over the Border, maybe; and stay there for a while.

The soft purring of a cat came. Close to Jeffers. Right by the door, in fact. The purring became louder, louder. Jeffers moved a step, another. Very gingerly. Where was that confounded purring cat? Would he step on it?

No light to reflect from the purring beast's eyes. Dead silence in the other room. Was Donnelly still thinking? Had the purring not reached them? Or were the two men, with drawn guns, slipping to the door to shoot?

Jeffers took another step. Another. Still another—and a wild squall of pain came from under Jeffers' feet.

Trapped, by a purring cat's tail!

The light went out in the office. Jeffers went around the end of the counter in two swift leaps, crouched there. He waited, tensely. Thoughts shifted swiftly. If he fled for the ladder, tried to get out the small window, they could see and shoot him—kill him like a dog!

Silence still in the next room. Jeffers was keyed up, thinking fast. If they came in to search for him, he might get back into the office unseen, slip out the rear door. That would still give him a chance to get away, his job well done.

The door opened, showed a faint grey oblong from street lights reflected against the window curtains. Two dim figures crept through it. They went around the far end of the counter, thirty feet from where Jeffers crouched. He could see them dimly. See them move forward a few steps.

Now was his chance. Jeffers moved silently, to get behind the counter. From there he could slip into the office. And just at that moment, something soft brushed against his hand as he crouched. Something soft that purred loudly, forgivingly.

And that forgiving purr of the cat was all Remsen and Dan Donnelly needed. Coupled with the squall, it made them certain somebody was in that room, had overheard their words—and stepped on the cat's tail.

A shot ripped out. The bullet crashed into the wall four feet from Carl Jeffers. The cat screamed harshly, and there was the crash of crockery from nearby as her wild leap landed her among the china. Another shot, and crockery smashed.

Another. That thudded close to Jeffers. He stiffened. Nothing to do, now, but fight. They would kill him. He drew the golden gun in

his right hand, slid his left over for his own holstered gun, got it firmly in his hand. Remsen. Donnelly. And Dan Donnelly was Mary's father—

Ripping, crashing shots, then. Splintering wood, tinware crashing, crockery going into small bits. The frightened, squalling cat who had started the whole thing by purring.

A moaning cry, somebody wounded. The thudding fall of a big body. Another moan. Jeffers was flat on the floor. Shooting his last shots, he was sure. Not wounded, just low for shelter against the flying lead. Something staggering at him in the darkness. A big, burly figure of a man who had gone down, grimly and gamely dragged himself back on his feet to kill the man who had shot him.

That was Dan Donnelly.

Fighting his last fight, maybe, but making it a good one. Murderer and thief he might be; was, in fact. But hell on wheels in a fight was Dan Donnelly.

Jeffers took aim as two bullets whammed the floor close to him. Took aim, and pulled trigger. Just once.

Donnelly swayed forward. Swayed faster, lower, crashed to his face on the floor.

Shouts and cries outside the store now hammered into Jeffers' brain. He rose slowly. Three steps took him to Dan Donnelly. He rolled the big body over, struck a match. A bullet hole straight through the heart told its own story. Dan Donnelly was dead. Jeffers had killed him, killed Mary's father.

Somebody was beating at the door. The blows sounded louder than the shouts. People all around the place; no chance to escape. A window crashed in small pieces. The big voice of Murphy, the deputy sheriff, shouted out:

"What's happened?"

Jeffers' voice was weary as he called:

"Come in, Murphy!"

Murphy came in, as Jeffers struck a match, touched it to a lamp. Some people followed. All could see Jeffers standing beside the body of Dan Donnelly. Murphy glanced at Jeffers, waited.

"I did it," Jeffers said wearily. "Take me to the jail an' I'll talk there."

Murphy shrugged, looked at Remsen.

"Still alive," he said. He walked over, stared down at Donnelly—and gasped: "That gun—again!"

He stared at Jeffers. Stared curiously, intently. Then he looked down again at the gun on Donnelly's chest. The golden gun, that had belonged to Jack Burgess.

A NIGHT behind the bars of a small cell, dawn, a breakfast that could scarcely be forced down. A cigarette—another.

Jeffers sat on the rude bunk, his expression tired, but not hopeless. He had told the whole story to Murphy, and the deputy had grinned at the end. Grinned, and said the safe would maybe tell the truth about the whole thing. Anyhow, Murphy expressed himself as being very much "for" Carl Jeffers.

An hour of smoking, and Murphy was back grinning broadly.

"Yuh win," he said. "That safe shore was packed with stuff. Enough tuh hang the whole crowd. We got a hard-rock miner to blow it. They've taken the stuff tuh the judge and district attorney. A few little things tuh do—an' I'll be gittin' an order tuh turn yuh loose."

Jeffers nodded his thanks. Murphy grinned, nodded, and disappeared. Jeffers shook his head, his lips a tight line. Free, and a good job done. But in the doing—Mary—He choked a little.

Was there anything in that safe to incriminate her?

Her slim figure, her pretty face, seemed to take shape before Carl Jeffers' eyes. Seemed to be in the cell, that figure. Was it an omen? She to suffer, perhaps be put in the penitentiary?

Jeffers gasped one word, "Mary!" and came to his feet. She was not in the cell, but stood in real flesh and blood just outside his door. Stood staring at him.

He saw her grey eyes. The bruise, dull-blue, on her forehead. She stood for some very long moments, just staring at Carl Jeffers.

Then, as Jeffers stared back, realizing that his bullets had killed Dan Donnelly, her voice came, softly.

"You," she said simply. She shook her head, as though puzzled, went on: "All the time I wanted to get you to help me, all the time I was thinking you wouldn't—and you really were helping me!"

Jeffers stared in utter bewilderment. He saw her hand come through the bars, reach toward him. He did not move.

"I don't understand," he said. "I killed yore father."

She motioned for him to come closer, to take her hand. Still he did not move.

"Murphy could have told you," she said. "But I wanted to, myself. Donnelly wasn't my father. He married Mother three years ago, just before she died. She was fooled, but *I* wasn't. I got the big ranch that he expected to get from her. I played up to him, came here with him to trade my ranch for the K-R. It looked like a good trade—except for one thing they thought I didn't know: there was gold under some of my range land! I let them go on, thinking they were fooling me, to trap them and jail them. I wanted your help. And we've won!"

There was something in the way she said it that brought Carl Jeffers to the barred door. He reached through, caught her. He stared for a moment.

"Mary," he said.

She nodded, whispered as her lips met his:

"We're going to be very happy."

How Well Do You Know Your West?

Can you answer these five questions? After writing your answers down, check up on Page 112 to see if you savvied 'em proper.

1. What were the gambling games played in the saloons of the West?

2. What, approximately, was the population of Tombstone in the 1880s?

3. Who was Chief Joseph and what was he famous for?

4. What well-known Texas ranger curbed the autocratic criminal power of General Juan Cortina, "Prince of the Mexican Cattle Thieves"?

5. What was the record for a continuous ride of the Pony Express? What was the usual length of a ride for the galloping expressmen?

DELANEY *Brings* 'EM IN

The Sheriff Was Old, but He Had Plenty of New Tricks Up His Sleeve When Chasing Outlaws!

By W. D. HOFFMAN

Author of "Hellbusters of the Rio Grande," etc.

"I'm sheriff here yet," the old man said

OLD MAN DELANEY, sheriff of Malpais County, cocked his angular head and listened while the rival candidate for the job denounced him as "irrelevant, incompetent and insignificant, a laughin' stock in the nostrils of old an' young!"

"Bring'm-In" Delaney, they often called him, some in ridicule, some in earnest. He had always brought them in—until the Big Arroyo train holdup. The Wells-Fargo chief detective who came in after the robbery referred to him as a hick sheriff.

A queer-looking duffer was Bring-'m-In Delaney, everyone admitted. He was a laugh, silver star and all. But while folks had fun at the expense of Bring'm-In because of his doleful aspect, his small head upthrust from a wrinkled neck, his beanpole body, the fun was good-natured, without malice. The old fel-

low had been faithful and efficient in his day—had brought them in.

It was on the last night of the Great Midway Carnival in San Felipe that Bigfoot Johnson announced his candidacy for sheriff. In the glare of the oil lamps the stocky cowman made a fiery campaign speech lambasting the incumbent for failure to round up the Bandanna gang for the Big Arroyo holdup.

Pointing a huge finger at the quaint-looking oldster, he demanded roughly:

"Would yuh bring 'em in, Delaney, if it turned out yore own son was one of that Bandanna gang of train-robbers?"

That staggered Bring'm-In for a moment. He squinted up at the speaker with a queer look that might have meant a shooting. But after a little thought he made cautious relpy:

"I'd bring 'em in, no matter who. 'Course, yuh don't mean nothin' personal in that question?"

Folks all about the pair began to look around for an opening for safe retreat.

"Nope," gruffed Bigfoot, breaking the tension. "That's a perinthetical question, if yuh know what that means." He raised a freckled paw toward the listeners. "Now, folks, yuh have heered my speech. In conclusion, I'll state there's a lot of hard-drinkin' cowboys out of jobs around here that might have done that holdup. Put me into the office, people, and I'll track them outlaws down in a hurry!"

For days afterwards the citizenry talked about that speech. And everybody but the old sheriff himself speculated on whether Bigfoot Johnson actually meant that young Newt Delaney, reckless, hard-riding cowboy out of a job, had been one of the train-robbing crew.

When Bring'm-In Delaney forked his line-backed buckskin horse, his sharp elbows swung out like rocking cranes. But he could ride. And he was riding now—one week after Bigfoot's insinuating speech.

THROUGH a drenching rain he galloped into San Felipe on a Sunday evening. For hours the desert had soaked up the rain like a sponge, then pools began to form, dry arroyos filled with yellow water, lakes appeared in the lowlands, and the streets of San Felipe became a quagmire of adobe mud.

Bring'm-In Delaney's buckskin hurled the dirt and water from flying hoofs, and the sheriff's yellow slicker was plastered from collar to hem with the muddy mixture.

It was to have been the night of Bring'm-In's big political rally, but the storm had spoiled it. Folks would have ridden in to hear the speech; they could not be expected to swim in.

Through the misty window of the pool hall a sharp-eyed cowpuncher sighted the old lawman as he splashed by.

"Bring'm-In's ridin' hell-for-leather!" he sang out. "Ain't even stoppin' to make that speech. Travelin' like he was on the outlaw trail shore 'nuf."

A loud guffaw went up from the village loafers.

"Chasin' Bandanna spooks again?" sneered a partisan of Bigfoot Johnson. "I'm offerin' two to one he don't bring in that hell-bendin' kid of his'n."

The laughter ceased at that. When anyone mentioned the sheriff in connection with Newt the humor became strained, unsavory; the old fellow became a pathetic figure, to be pitied.

Bring'm-In Delaney rode on. When he reached the rented house of Wells-Fargo Detective Jack Morrison at the edge of town, he halted. Lights glistened through the rain-

splattered windows. He had urgent business with Morrison.

As he dismounted, the sight of a horse tied to the fence gave him a start.

"Newt's black geldin'!" he cried, surprised that his boy should be here, yet overjoyed at his return.

The sheriff hadn't seen his son since the departure of the carnival. It was rumored Newt had eloped with Pretty May, juggler with the traveling show, daughter of the owner. Young Delaney had been out of work for three months, since the Rafter H had sold its stock and discharged all employees, including the foreman, Bigfoot Johnson. That incident explained why Bigfoot had entered the ring for sheriff.

As the old man started up the walk he met Newt coming down.

"Yuh here, Dad?" the cowboy asked, startled. He looked worried. Bring'm-In thought he smelled whiskey on him.

"Hello, Newt. Seein' Jack Morrison, was yuh?"

"Yeah. He's the meanest jasper alive, that dick," declared young Delaney, bitterly. "I figgered to get on as train guard. He's been hirin' men since the holdup. Gave me the haha."

"If yuh're broke, son, I could let yuh have a leetle money. Was yuh—" the sheriff's doleful countenance lighted in a smile—"was yuh and that carnival lady hitched like I'd heered?"

"Naw. She handed me the runaround for another feller. I was a fool, I reckon. Didn't have a job, anyhow."

"Yore mother was worried, son. Jest wait here a minute—I'll be right out."

"Can't do it, Dad, honest Injun. Got to see some *hombres* tonight. Be over to see Mother tomorrow."

"Tomorrer! Why, where yuh goin' tonight, in all this rain?"

"Got to go. See yuh tomorrow."

Newt moved off to his horse. Bring'm-In watched him rise to the saddle, not without pride. Newt was a strapping fellow, though only nineteen. Drinking tonight a little, but— The sheriff could understand.

"Teched him purty hard, that gal, him follerin' the carnival thataway." A lump rose in the old man's throat as he recalled Pretty May, a resplendent, birdlike creature in tights, tossing knives, balls and colored bottles above her white shoulders and golden head. "Women is funny things, sometimes."

HE walked up to the house and knocked. It was an ill-tempered, impatient Jack Morrison who answered the summons, his round, florid face beet-red in the lamplight.

"It's yuh, eh, Delaney?" His voice was gruff, uncivil. "That kid of yores was jest here. I told him I didn't have a job, an' if I did—"

"Yuh wouldn't give it to any Delaney, I reckon," cut in the sheriff. "I got business with yuh, Morrison."

"Step in, and make it snappy."

Removing his dripping slicker, Bring'm-In Delaney followed the detective into his den, newly adorned with pictures, weapons and like mementoes of his long career as a big-city peace officer.

"Jest cast yore eyes onto this." The sheriff drew from a pocket an unsigned telegram, dated at Gentry, Ariz.:

BANDANNA GANG PLANS ANOTHER HOLDUP AT BIG ARROYO MONDAY NIGHT.

"Yeah?" Detective Morrison pushed the message aside after glancing at it. "Anonymous. Phony, probably."

"Happens I got info'mation they're shippin' bullion from Smelter Station tomorrer night." Bring'm-In replied pointedly. "Anyhow, I want to

know which train's bein' guarded—Number Ten or the Midnight Flyer?"

Jack Morrison rolled an unlit cigar between his teeth.

"Number Ten," he grunted. "But lay off this thing, Delaney. We'll handle it."

"Yuh tellin' the sheriff of this county to lay off when they's a robbery bein' hatched?" demanded Bring'm-In, scornfully.

Ugly lines formed about the detective's mouth.

"We don't want any posse out there scaring that gang away, understand? We've got a trap set for that bunch."

"Got a trap set, heh?" The sheriff scratched his head. "Mebbe that's different. I'll go alone, then."

Jack Morrison kicked his swivel chair around.

"Yuh stay out of it, Delaney! It's danged queer that boy of yores jest asked the same question about the train I'm guarding. Get what I'm drivin' at?"

"Nossir." The old man's serious, blinking eyes were puzzled.

"I'll talk straight." The detective spoke through teeth clenched on the cold cigar. "That boy Newt is pretty wild. Travels with a crooked bunch. Yuh might have to shoot yore own son, Delaney, if yuh try to halt that robbery!"

Bring'm-In leaped to his feet, his wrinkled countenance twitching. His long figure dipped low over the desk; both hands, doubled into fists, swung sideways as though to strike the hard, unflinching face of the Wells-Fargo man. Morrison's words, bantering, challenging, steadied the sheriff.

"Get hold of Newt. Keep him home tomorrow night. It might prevent the holdup. Besides, yore kid and Bigfoot Johnson have been gunning for each other. Newt's a quick-trigger gent and it won't look good if he kills yore rival on the eve of election."

That sobered Bring'm-In. Newt and Bigfoot gunning for each other?

That was bad—bad for both of them!

The sheriff picked up his rain-soaked hat, moved to the door.

"They been lyin' like hell about my boy." That was all he could say as he walked to the porch. Drawing on his slicker, he swayed down the steps.

IT was still raining when, toward evening, the sheriff saddled up and rode southwest toward the Mexican Border. The Bandanna gang had crossed the line for the previous hold, and Bring'm-In Delaney hoped to pick up their trail before nightfall.

Number Ten was due at Big Arroyo at one o'clock in the morning. The Midnight Flyer would have passed the trestle and flag-stop boxcar an hour before the bullion train. Hence there was ample time.

Traveling through the storm, wading freshets up to the saddle skirts, the sheriff finally reached a spot where the grey hills dipped down to the Rafter H fence on the International Line. Here he watched closely for tracks.

"Fellers that done that other job was mighty familiar with the Rafter range." This thought he had voiced to himself many times. But it did not mean that Newt, as a Rafter hand, was any more involved than before.

He halted abruptly. "Fence wire loose!" It had been detached from two posts, allowed to sag. "Tracks!" Without dismounting he could see the marks plainly, even where cupped with water in the mud. "Four hosses. Fresh sign."

That was enough. His pulse quickened as he turned his face against the driving rain and rode slowly

north, hat brim lowered like a waterspout in front of his eyes.

Big Arroyo was fifteen miles north. Nearest railroad point on the Mexican Border, it was also easiest location for a holdup. The high curved trestle there always meant slow speed, especially when the arroyo was booming with water.

WHEN nightfall came he was still riding. Coming to an abandoned line camp adobe, he entered, found some dry mesquite root and built a fire to warm himself and kill time.

Thus engaged, he heard riders splashing through the water. His hand went to his pistol as he looked sharply out into the darkness.

In a moment he heard a voice:

"There's a horse by that adobe shack!"

The sheriff's blood ran cold; it was Newt who had sounded that warning. For a moment the old man did not move.

Inward strength that always seemed to come to him in emergencies steadied him now. He walked out into the rain. Into the gloom he peered.

"Hello, Newt," he called. "Kinda acts like this storm was never goin' to let up."

Silence, ominous, unbroken save for the swish of the rain against the drenched ground.

"Expected yuh'd be around to see yore mother today, Newt. Biggest rain I remember since the day yuh was born in that old log house at Comanche."

A horse moved forward.

"It's yuh, Dad, shore 'nuf! Yuh alone?"

"Yeah," replied Bring'm-In. The sound of the boy's voice bucked up his spirits immeasurably.

"Bad night fer yuh to be out in all this storm, ain't it, Dad?"

"Been trailin' a bunch of riders," came the sheriff's prompt reply. "Figured they was goin' to hold up the bullion train."

Another moment of silence; then:

"Dad, yuh'd never have a chance with that gang."

"I'm purty good on the shoot, even yet, son. Figger to make it plumb oncomfortable with a hail of lead, pistol and rifle both. Yuh see, I'll have the advantage back in the mesquite, and the outlaws will be lit up by the train lights so's I can cut 'em down to a man."

A longer wait than before. Finally Newt spoke a bit huskily.

"Somebody's handed yuh a bum steer, Dad. We came through the pass, only way to Big Arroyo in this flood. Didn't see nobody. If we do, we'll wrangle 'em. Yuh go back, Dad. That arroyo is boilin', runnin' wild. Got to swim it two, three times to get to the trestle. Yuh'd never make it."

Bring'm-In Delaney swallowed hard.

"Nope. Either they'll finish me off tonight or I'll kill 'em, looks like. Now, Newt, I'm sheriff of this county and I need he'p. Yuh drop whatever yuh was doin'. I hereby deputize yuh and yore friends to ride for Big Arroyo and wait for Number Ten."

He cleared his throat.

"She carries the bullion," he went on. "'Bout sixteen thousand. I'll be slippin' up later—east side of the trestle. Yuh boys roost near the boxcar, and if that train is stopped on flag, yuh take 'em in or shoot 'em. That's yore job tonight, son, and yuh'll have to ferget that dance or whatever and he'p the old man out."

He had no consciousness of being funny. To him, Newt and his pals were square, on a legitimate excursion of some sort, and he had deputized them as was his prerogative when occasion required.

"There's nothin' to it, Dad. Ar-

royo's a millrace. Yuh'd be drowned," insisted young Delaney.

"I'm bringin' 'em in, dead or alive."

The boy knew his father, realized the futility of argument. The only way to keep him off this outlaw trail tonight would be to disable him or forcibly drive him back. Finally Newt rode away in the darkness.

ONE o'clock in the morning. The rain driving down in sheets, the wind howling, blackness everywhere. Above the roar of the gale the prolonged, dismal whistle of a locomotive, rising at times to a weird, shrill crescendo as the gusts of the gale drove it forward.

Then through the blackness a piercing beam of light, dots of flitting red and yellow and the rumble of the slowing train as it struck the Big Arroyo trestle.

Wet as a drowned rat from repeated crossings of the riverlike ravine, the sheriff discovered now he was on the embankment opposite the flag-stop. Once more he put his horse into the swift current.

Swimming breast-high, nostrils blowing the spray, the animal fought the stream. Suddenly the night rang with a burst of gunfire, the piercing, staccato explosions hurtling through the gale.

Bring'm-In Delaney struggled out of the water, a gurgling groan in his throat; Newt was there, in the middle of it; more than one man would die in that terrific fusillade—perhaps his boy. But the greatest dread in the veteran's heart was that the guards might kill Newt mistaking him for an outlaw.

The train lights flickered, the cars began to move. Soon the twinkle of lights melted away in the mist. Then as the old lawman led his horse to the top of the grade he heard a voice in the darkness:

"Get it all, Newt?"

"Yeah. Come on!" sang out the cowboy. Hoofs splashed through the water beside the railroad tracks.

"Newt! Newt! Where are yuh?" panted the sheriff, his voice faint as a whisper. Blackness everywhere. The wind drove the rain into his eyes and against his drenched body; he felt the buckskin's neck trembling under his hand.

Abruptly his foot touched something like the body of a man. He stooped, felt of the object, breathing hard. His flashlight refused to work; his matches were wet. He fired his six-shooter close to the dead man's face. Faint as was the little flare from the gun muzzle, it revealed the features of a hard-drinking cowpuncher of the Rafter H.

"Pothook Jones!" the sheriff breathed. The discovery shocked him. Friend of Newt was Pothook—they'd been entirely too intimate for Newt's own good.

With an effort, Bring'm-In lifted his water-filled boots and crawled into the saddle. The buckskin moved off into the void, the rider giving him his head to find his way home.

"Newt got the bullion; he'll be takin' it to turn over to me, as sheriff," the old man muttered, with stubborn determination to see things that way. "Him and his pals licked them outlaws clean, like they was deputized to do."

A DULL grey fog of daylight was on the San Felipe horizon when the bedraggled, rain-soaked sheriff rode into the yard of his home. As he moved through the wide door of his barn he glimpsed a horse in the stall—Newt's black!

And then he saw his long-legged son slipping out of the adjoining stall and through the rear opening leading to the house.

"Newt boy, what's yore hurry?"

Young Delaney turned at the door, his face twitching nervously.

"Trailed me, huh, Dad? Yuh hustle to the house—must be all in. I'll be there in a minute—"

"But where'd yuh put the bullion, son? That shore was a battle—"

"Lift 'em!" barked a voice from a corner of the barn. Out of a pile of baled alfalfa stepped Detective Jack Morrison, his forty-five leveled. "Both of yuh!" He stepped forward briskly toward the pair.

"Brought 'em in, eh, Mister Bring'm-In Delaney?" The Wells-Fargo man's tone was sour, hard.

Keeping father and son covered, he walked sideways to the feedbox of the nearest stall, reached in with one hand, threw out a mass of hay, then lifted two water-soaked canvas sacks, which he heaved with an effort to the straw-littered floor.

"The evidence," he said, sharply. "Yuh're under arrest, young feller. Not accusing yuh, Sheriff, onless yuh interfere—"

His words were snapped off by the heavy report of a six-shooter. One of Newt Delaney's remarkable draws had enabled him to whip his hand to his pistol and fire.

Absolute silence followed the report.

Jack Morrison was standing there like a wooden man, his large Colt gun bullet-driven from his stinging fingers, the frame of the weapon shattered by the leaden slug.

"Keerful, Newt—yuh oughtn't of done that—" began the sheriff, dumbfounded, his voice shaking. Young Delaney's command rang clear:

"Fork your horse and ride, Morrison!"

"Hold on, Newt—" Bring'm-In stepped forward. "Tell him how yuh got holt of that stuff, so's—"

"Mother's coming! Stop her, Dad!" the boy cried out, gesturing to the rear.

As the sheriff sped to the door, Newt Delaney swung up the heavy bullion sacks, hooked them over the saddlehorn of his father's buckskin. He snatched up the barn shovel.

"Ride, dang yuh, Morrison, or I'll drill yuh!" he exploded, his gun weaving recklessly.

The detective loped out of the wide front entrance, and Newt passed him at a gallop. They rode in different directions, Morrison toward town, the boy toward the open plain, the shovel jerking up and down from the scabbard of his father's saddle.

TO the alarmed old lady who came hurrying to the rear of the barn, Bring'm-In Delaney tried to explain:

"It was a leetle misfire, Mother. Newt, he was on the trail of them Bandanna holdups with me last night an'—"

"Newt's come home—praise be! But where did he go? Did he get married to that gel in the carnival?"

The sheriff was saddling Newt's black.

"No," he said. "I got to he'p him bring in that bullion." Mounting, the old lawman rode out of the barn, his red-lidded eyes glued to the tracks in the muddy ground.

The rain had completely ceased. It was slow trailing due to sheets of water here and there, but the sheriff managed to dog Newt's steps and finally where the imprints overlapped one another, showing the bay had halted, Bring'm-In dismounted.

He found evidence of recent digging.

"Buried it here; that's why he took the shovel," the old man murmured, lips quavering. With his hands he scraped away the loose loam, dug out the two sacks heavy with gold bars.

Laying them over the saddlehorn, he went on.

Soon thereafter he lost Newt's tracks completely at the flooded ar-

royo. But he continued to ride to the scene of the holdup, hoping against hope daylight would present new facts that would be more favorable to his son.

There he made a startling discovery. In addition to the body of Pothook Jones lying beside the track, he found another dead man at the foot of the steps leading into the boxcar, face down in the mud. Pothook Jones' bay horse grazed in the soggy grass nearby; another animal was tied at a corner of the boxcar. Bring'm-In Delaney was stooping to examine the body by the steps when he heard a low groan within the car.

Hurrying inside, he found the telegraph operator tied up in a corner. As the sheriff cut his bonds, the white-faced man told what had happened:

"I was in here—with an armed guard sent out by Detective Morrison. When the outlaws came, the guard slipped outside. One of the holdup men forced me to flag the train, then the other outlaw drove me in here and tied me up. The guard started firing. Just then somebody shouted:

"Look out, Newt!" There was a lot of shooting in a moment, and I saw the guard fall by the steps. The train pulled out and I was left here."

"Killed a guard." The old man's face was tragic. He turned to the ladderlike steps. Bending over the fallen guard, he moved the lifeless body over on its side.

Abruptly he stepped back, breathing hard.

"Bigfoot Johnson!"

A low moan trailed the word. This then was how the trouble between Newt and the cowman-candidate had terminated.

Bring'm-In Delaney walked slowly back and forth along the railroad track. On the one hand he could not believe his boy had done these things; on the other, he could not ignore the evidence.

He must bring Newt in.

LOUD-VOICED and profane, a mob of some fifty angry men surged in the muddy street in front of the Western Union office, storming about the scrawny-necked sheriff who had just arrived with the body of his campaign rival and that of the cowboy Pothook Jones. Bring-'m-In had picked up enough of the talk to know Detective Morrison and Newt Delaney were in the telegraph office. Morrison had presumably cornered the prisoner there, while the irate citizens threatened a lynching. The sheriff's arrival with the bodies had only added fuel to the flames.

"Nossir, yuh're not goin' in there to save yore kid!" roared a voice.

"Drag him off his hoss!" shouted another. "The old buzzard was in on the robbery and killin'. Drag him down, boys—drag him down!"

With steady, somber eyes Bring-'m-In Delaney surveyed the crowd. There was no panic in him. His own safety amounted to nothing.

"Boys," he said, "I'm sheriff here yet."

Slowly he drew out his walnut-handled Colt, lifted a foot from the stirrup and swung his beanpole frame out of the saddle. Taking the gun in hand was only a gesture; he pointed it at no one. The crowd hesitated, then made way, letting him pass to the sidewalk unmolested.

As he strode toward the door of the telegraph office his back was turned to the throng, but no hand was raised against him.

"Henry," he addressed the town liveryman, facing around, "have somebody take them bodies to the undertaker's, and that stolen bullion on my saddle, will yuh put it in the bank?"

A murmur of surprise swept the crowd on learning the sheriff had

recovered the gold. Bring'm-In tried the door, found it locked. "Open up, Morrison. Sheriff speakin'."

The door was opened. But it was not the detective who admitted the old lawman; it was Newt. The raw-boned son of Bring'm-In had turned the tables on Morrison, disarmed him. The detective was seated on a wall bench.

"Glad yuh came," he remarked, dryly. "Yore outlaw kid admits he buried the bullion—confesses he killed Bigfoot Johnson, who was actin' as guard—"

"Yuh're a crook, Morrison," cut in Newt.

The detective's dark eyes narrowed. "Bigfoot laid the whole plot before me," he said, grimly. "Told me about Newt and his Bandanna gang. I hired Bigfoot to help trap the outlaws, but the kid was too quick for him. Stole the drop from me right here, too."

"Set down, Newt," the old man said. "I ain't had a chance to talk to yuh."

Young Delaney was excited; he sat down, jumped to his feet again, pointed an accusing finger at the detective.

"He's a crook—was in on the robbery. I arrested him, as deputy sheriff."

"Begin at the beginnin', Newt."

"It was night before last. I was at Morrison's house—seen yuh there," Newt related, jerkily. "Out on the porch I watched Bigfoot and this dick. I heard them talkin'. Bigfoot lied, said I was the robber. He made a deal with Morrison. The dick was to order guards switched from Number Ten to the Flyer, so the holdups could rob the messenger. Morrison made the switch—there was no guards on the rain. Bigfoot was to wait till the loot was taken, then plug the outlaws. He was to split the gold with the dick and turn over to the company only half of it, sayin' one of the outlaws skipped with the rest." Newt's eyes snapped as he gestured angrily toward the express detective.

"And yuh spoiled the trick, huh?" drawled Jack Morrison. "Got away with all of the bullion—sixteen thousand in eight ten-pound bars. Buried it—"

BRING'M-IN DELANEY raised a gnarled hand.

"Yore turn will come next, Morrison," he growled. "Go on, Newt. Jest what did yuh do last night?"

"I and Billy Hedges was together—figgered tuh catch Bigfoot red-handed—"

"Billy Hedges?" asked the sheriff, quickly. Hedges was town marshal of San Felipe.

"Yeah. Billy's still huntin' the *hombre* that escaped. We cut the trail of the two outlaws at the Rafter-Mexico line, followed 'em north. It was Billy with me at that shack, Dad. Didn't want yuh to know, then, fear Bigfoot would kill yuh. Well, we got lost, but reached the trestle when Pothook Jones and Sneeze Wilcox was holdin' up the express messenger. Them two and Bigfoot planned the whole thing. When we rode up, Bigfoot started firin' and I drilled him. Billy Hedges downed Pothook Jones. I grabbed the gold from Pothook, and Billy took after Sneeze Wilcox. I ain't seen Billy since. Sure, I buried the bullion—to keep this crook from gettin' it." He glared at the Wells-Fargo man.

Morrison rose from the wall seat. A deep twinkle had crept into his dark eyes.

"If yuh can prove yuh were with Marshal Hedges, young feller, it lets yuh out. Seems I've pegged yuh fer a crook, and yuh've pegged *me* for one. Both might be mistaken."

"Not *me*," young Delaney snapped.

"Newt, boy," soothed Bring'm-In,

"shorely Bigfoot Johnson wasn't in on the robbery?"

"Shore he was!" The boy pulled from a pocket a telegram. "Just got this when I came here to send another one. Read it."

"Dated down at Gentry," muttered the sheriff, recalling that the unsigned message telling of the intended holdup had come from there. He scanned the lines:

WHY DID YOU LEAVE YOU KNOW I MADE DATE WITH JOHNSON TO LEARN WHERE HE GOT ALL THAT MONEY STOP I HAVE FOUND OUT HE CASHED FIFTEEN THOUSAND GOLD IN MEXICAN BANK MEET ME IN TUCSON PLEASE

MAY

"That's why he was gunnin' for me—over Miss May. He wanted her," said Newt, shrilly. "The fifteen thousand was taken from the train a month ago. He figured to pull this robbery, then kill me. He'd say I was the outlaw. Then he'd win Miss May, he figured, and beat yuh at the election, too." Young Delaney moved to the counter. "Look over this one, Dad. I just sent it."

RECOVERED STOLEN BULLION AND STAND READY TO DELIVER TO WELLS FARGO BUT NOT MORRISON LETTER FOLLOWS

NEWT DELANEY
DEPUTY SHERIFF

"Well, I'll be—" Jack Morrison, glancing over the sheriff's shoulder, laughed heartily. "I apologize, kid. Bigfoot had me fooled about yuh—plenty. Yeah, I had him sized up right enough when he made that offer to split the loot, but planned to use him to catch the robbers, then deal with him later."

"A nice cock-and-bull story," scoffed Newt, "seein' yuh helped in the holdup by keepin' guards off Number Ten."

Chuckling, Jack Morrison strode back and forth in the little room.

"Number Ten was guarded," he remarked, lightly. "Enough men on it to handle Bigfoot and the Bandanna gang both. It was the Midnight Flyer that was held up!"

"The Flyer!" blurted Newt. "Yuh're loco—that train wasn't carryin' the gold!"

"It was. And not a guard on it. I arranged it that way to fool the holdups. But the robbers fooled me because the Flyer was running one hour late on account of the flood," affirmed Jack Morrison. "On Number Ten's time."

BRING'M-IN DELANEY grinned and his eyes lighted up with understanding, while Newt, slowly realizing the truth, offered a hand to Morrison.

"I had you wrong," he admitted.

"Forget it, kid. I had yuh wrong—double."

The mob outside was growing impatient and noisy once more, calling to the Wells-Fargo man to bring out the prisoner.

"I reckon," mused the sheriff, "we'll go out there now and let this detective ca'm them jaspers down. I got the bullion in the bank fer yuh. And there's two bodies over to the undertaker's, Pothook Jones and Bigfoot Johnson."

"What's that? Yuh brought 'em in?" queried Morrison.

"I brung 'em in."

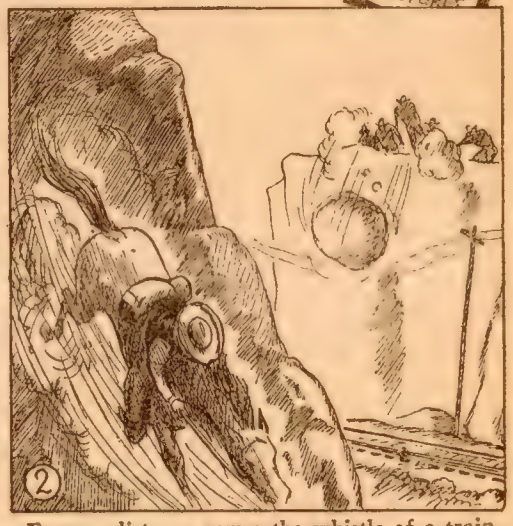
And when they moved out into the street they found Marshal Billy Hedges in charge of the third member of the Bandanna gang, Sneeze Wilcox, who had made a full confession.

NEXT MONTH: HANGTOWN GUNS, a Rip-Snorting Complete Novelette by Syl MacDowell —Packed with Action!

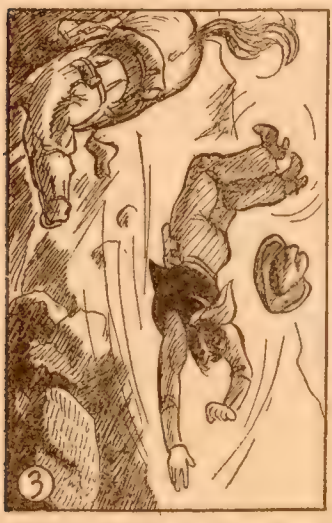
QUICK-TRIGGER LAW

A SIX-GUN SANDY ADVENTURE IN PICTURES

"What th—" Sheriff Sandy suddenly halts his mount and stares tensely across the pass. "Bandits an' they're gonna shove that boulder down so they can wreck an' rob th' limited! I gotta stop th' train *pronto!*" The young sheriff hears a shout as the outlaws spot him.



From a distance comes the whistle of a train. The Limited is coming! Sandy gallops madly down the steep slope to warn the trainmen of their danger. He hears the rumble of the big rock falling toward the track. "Git goin', Hoss," Sandy urges his mount. "Make speed!"



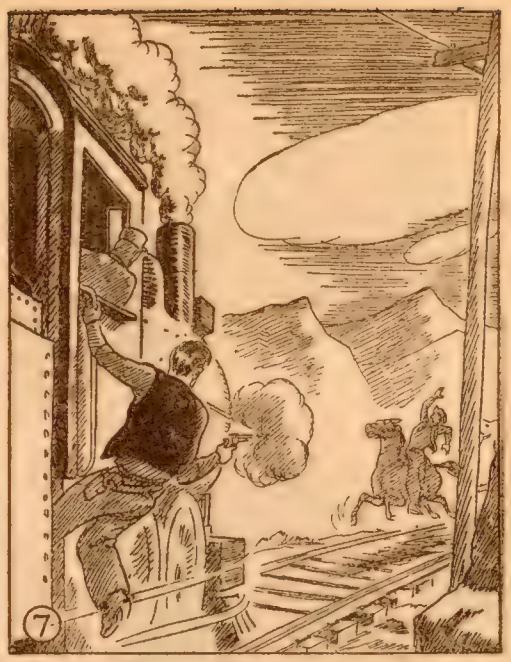
Bang! One of the outlaws picks up a rifle and fires. Sandy's horse dies. The young sheriff plunges headlong into a pile of brush some distance below. "That shore was close!" He escapes unhurt.

Sandy leaps to his feet. He waits with gun drawn as he hears the clatter of hoofs. One of the bandits left on guard below appears. "Reach high!" snaps the sheriff. But the outlaw fires at Sandy!

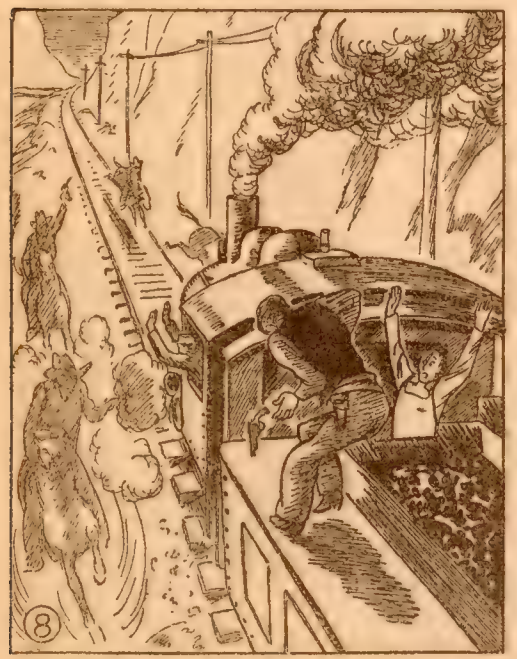
A bullet whines past the sheriff's ears. His gun flames—the outlaw reels, and then drops out of the saddle—dead. Again Sandy hears the train whistle. He dashes for the outlaw's horse.

[*Turn Page*]

Madly Sandy urges the horse to greater speed as he gallops back along the track. "Stop, stop!" he shouts even though he knows he can't be heard. He waves his red handkerchief as a signal of danger. The Limited begins to slow down. It won't crash into that boulder on the track further along!



"Outlaws!" shouts Sandy as the train stops. "Gonna hold up th' train!" He leaps from the saddle, grabs the rail on the engine cab. A bullet thuds against the engine as the bandits appear. *Crack!* Sandy fires and one of the outlaws goes down. The train crew is too frightened to act.



"What's the matter with yuh, *hombres*," growls Sandy to the train crew. "Afraid tuh fight!" He climbs to the top of the cab. *Bang!* A bullet gets him and he falls. Quickly the bandits rifle the baggage car and depart. Thoroughly frightened, passengers and train crew watch helplessly.

Sandy has merely been creased on the head by the bullet. He revives to find his head bandaged. "Which way did th' bandits go?" he demands of the trainmen. "North," answers the engineer. "You ain't goin' after them alone, Sheriff?" "I am," Sandy draws his guns. "An' mebbe I'll get 'em!"

Sandy tracks the outlaws to a cave about a mile from where the train crew are working to get the big boulder off the track. As he peers in he sees the bandits dividing the loot. "Claw th' sky," the young sheriff orders as one of the bandits turns and sees him.

Guns roar and flame—the acrid tang of powder smoke fills the air. A relentless, grim figure of justice, the young sheriff stands firing steadily. Bullets fly all about him—but the outlaws, startled by the aim and courage of the fighting lawman, suffer losses.

When the smoke of battle clears away Sandy discovers there are only two bandits left. The rest have all been killed or badly wounded. "Yuh jaspers had enough?" inquires Sandy, covering the two men "Shore have, Sheriff!" says one of them. "Yuh win!"

"It's th' sheriff!" shouts one of the train crew as Sandy appears marching the two prisoners ahead of him. "An' he got th' bandits!" The outlaws are carrying the loot stolen from the baggage car. "Hooray fer Sandy!" shouts the engineer. "He sure is quick-trigger law!"

NEXT MONTH: SIX-GUN SANDY in STAR-TOTER'S GRIT

DOOM RIDER

A Complete Novelette

Weird Menace Lurked At the S-Bar-S Ranch—and Sheriff Dal Fogarty Barged Right into the Thick of the Trouble!

By JACKSON COLE

Author of "Gun Justice," "Fightin' Ranny," etc.

CHAPTER I

A Killing

A MAD yell, quivering with fear and excitement and underlaid by mad galloping hoofs, brought Deputy Dal Fogarty bounding to his feet.

His cards went scattering over the bunkhouse floor. Jake Slagle, young boss of the S-Bar-S, and his four waddies jerked erect, startled. Dal was already over the threshold, racing through the darkness of the ranchyard.

The night was blinding, the starlight pallid after the glowing bunkhouse lamp, but even so Fogarty was able to see a blur of motion whirling wildly toward him.

Action
Thrills on
Every Page!

Unreal, fantastic blood-curdling, it bounded straight at Fogarty

The blur became a horse and rider. "Hi-yi!" an excited yelp cut the air again. "Hi, fellahs! I seen it! I seen it!"

Almost in one motion Dan swarmed into the saddle of his pony, at the hitch-rack, and swung the animal around. It was typical of him that he had wasted no time in questions. The pony was in full stride even be-

fore the harbinger of fate surged up to it.

"Well, I'll be durned! Th' sheriff! Sa-ay, mister—"

"Say it on the go, Pete," Dal directed quietly. "We're losin' time. Come on!"

With a smothered exclamation the night-herder jerked his mount in Dal's wake, spurred up beside him, and together they galloped back through the gate.

"My gosh!" groaned the cowboy. "It was—it was plumb horrible. I ain't ever took much stock in ghosts or devils, but when this—this *thing* comes leapin' an' dancin' straight *at* me—after finishin' off pore Jim—"

"Git organized, *hombre,*" interjected Dal crisply. "Talk sense. What about Jim Graves?"

"He's dead! It got him! Ain't I tellin' yuh?"

"Jake said he was in town."

"He was, I reckon. But it got him comin' home—laid him in that batch o' cottonwoods beside the creek. Yeah! It got him, 'xactly like it got Walt th' other night. Fer Gawd's sake, lissen, Dal! I'm nursin' that bunch o' dogies Jake aims to ship tomorrer, in the south pasture, when I hear a funny noise. It's far off, and quits sudden, but it shore sounds like a man's yell to me. Then, pretty *pronto,* a hoss comes rompin' up the creek trail. It's scared, and travelin' like a bat outa hell, but it's sure Jim's pinto aw' right, with his hull on it.

"I've got a mean feelin' in the pit o' my stomach, but I make tracks fer th' creek. The moon's been smothered, but just then she comes peerin' through a mist-cloud like a big lantern, an' I see Jim sprawled out stiff beside the trail. An' that ain't all. I see another thing—something dancin' an' bobbin' in the shadow o' the cottonwoods—ah-r-r!" The cowboy shivered, then caught himself and blurted on defensively, "Aw, I ain't yella, Dal! 'N' I didn't high-tail it right away. Nossir! I pulled my iron an' salivated them cottonwoods plentiful. A helluva lot o' good it did! Gawd! Yuh—yuh can't plug what ain't alive or human to begin with! There's an ongodly noise—"

"What sort o' noise?"

"Gosh, Dal, I dunno. A scared hoss is the closest to it I ever heard. The scream of a—a banshee might sound that way. Wow! It shore makes my hair curl. 'N' then, on top o' that, the *thing* goes an' makes a leapin' dive fer me—"

"The word *'thing'* don't give much of a picture, Pete. Didn't yuh git any idea a-tall of it?"

"Not much, but all I wanted, buleeve yuh me! It looked some like a waddy toppin' a mean bronc—only it wa'n't half big enough. Not half! Ahr-r-r! When this *thing* come rarin' fer me, thutty-forty feet at a clip, screechin' all the time—wal—"

"Look here, Pete. I won't ask if yuh was sober. But are yuh dead shore yuh saw anythin' a-tall?"

The puncher cursed extravagantly. "It's bad enough to get scared green, without bein' called a liar! Take a look at what's in front there, Mister Deppity!"

THEY had reached the creek. Both horses tried to swerve from the trail, their startled snorts indicating they already scented tragedy.

The moon at last had risen permanently above its mist-shroud. Its even glow revealed the outline of the cottonwoods, grouped at one side like gloomy sentinels. In their midst, now certainly, was no trace of motion, no sight or sound of any eerie phantom. But a dark blotch, showing clearly against the white dust of the trail-side, testified that at least one element of the puncher's story was grimly true.

Dal Fogarty slid to the ground,

and, jerking a powerful flashlight from his pocket, ran forward. The light fell on the body of Jim Graves, one of the S-Bar-S tophands, sprawled on his face with arms outflung. And he was dead, all right, though not until Dal turned the body over was made manifest the injury which had done for him—a stabbing knife thrust through chest wall and heart, which had turned the man's shirt-front into a soggy pool of blood.

The young officer nodded grimly. It was not the first time that week he had seen a wound like that. His eyes blazed; a flash of anger swiftly repressed, however, as he realized the need for calm action and reasoning.

Rising from his knees, Dal swept the light in a widening circle about the body. Its beam picked out a spot of red that was not blood. Dal bent once more, and from the ground beside the dead man picked up a small rectangle of crimson-spotted pasteboard. He stared at it briefly, then slipped the thing into a pocket.

Pete Saunders still sat his horse, watching with uneasy curiosity as Dal advanced into the cottonwoods, the flashlight spraying its white beam upon the ground. Emerging from the trees, Dal pursued a zigzag, wandering course across the open. It was so that Slagle and his punchers, galloping up in a compact group, discovered him.

"Jim, huh?" the ranch owner spat at his night-herder. "Damnation! How about it, Dal?"

The deputy switched off his light and walked back to the trail.

"I'm up against it," he stated quietly. "It was a deliberate killin', same as the one that rubbed out Walt—and done by the same snake, I think."

"Yeah? Just who?" queried Slagle with a trace of sarcasm.

"It's my job to find out, Jake. But it's no cinch. This is a queer business. The killer didn't use a hoss. No hoofprints."

"He's afoot, then, an'—"

"Must've been, Jake. Only—no footprints either."

"Aw, blazes! Yuh piped the same tune about Walt, an' we all stuck around like dummies. But not this time! The skunk didn't *fly* here, did he? If there's no hoofprints, by gosh, he's afoot. Yuh can suck yore thumb while he makes his getaway if yuh wanta. Not this spread!"

Dal shook his head soberly.

"Yuh're not goin' to catch him tonight, Jake, but if yuh crave to try, it's all right with me."

"Now that's real handsome!" growled one of the cowboys.

"Huh! Yuh've found out one thing anyway, Dal," another drawled. "It wa'n't nobody in this outfit knifed Walt."

"Yeah!" rejoined the first voice. "An' that's all the big sleuth has discovered since las' Tuesday night."

"Lay off that, Kit!" rasped Slagle sharply. "Yuh hit the trail toward Grizzly—an' keep yore gun clear, get me? Snady, yuh high-tail it west. East fer yuh, Mesquite—an' yuh, Jerry, cut fer Rocky Gulch. If anythin' moves across yore trail, stop it—or else! Off now, an' check in to me at the bunkhouse!"

THE punchers milled, scattered and were gone.

"Kin we move the body now, Mister Deppity?"

"Shore, Jake. There's nothing more to be done here."

"There's gonna be plenty doin' in this county—'less somethin' happens pretty sudden!" exploded the rancher savagely.

"Thanks fer the warnin'," nodded the deputy without animus. "Go as far as yuh like, Jake. I don't know that I blame yuh."

"Blazes!" Slagle grunted, and dropped his hand on Dal's shoulder

impulsively. "Reckon I'm pretty hot under the collar. That's all. But with some blood-mad loco startin' to clean out my spread—well—"

"Aw, I know it's tough medicine," Dal murmured uncomfortably. "An' I'm not gonna lay down on yuh. Yuh boys aim to take Jim to the ranch-house? Okay. Then I'll ramble back to town an' have a powwow with Pop Stanton. Yeah, I'll notify the coroner, too. And Jake, if yore waddies should scare up anything, will yuh let me know. Thanks. So-long."

CHAPTER II

Spider

SHERIFF STANTON was out of action with a broken leg. A horse had rolled on him a few days before, and, in view of developments, Pop secretly didn't regret the accident as much as he might have.

Age had sapped the old-timer's vigor. The county had long been peaceful. Now old Pop wasn't up to tracking down murderers, and though he cottoned to Fogarty, he was quite willing to let the young deputy be the public goat.

That unenviable status had been achieved by Dal almost overnight. The killing of Walt Mullins had been so brutal and so ruthless it set the range folk by the ears. The fact that the crime was unusually mysterious and unusually baffling made no difference. They looked to the law for instant, forthright action, and when they didn't get immediate satisfaction, they grumbled exceedingly.

The second murder, Dal knew, would fan smoldering discontent into raging flame. But what could he do? Since Walt's death, a scant half mile from where Jim Graves had been ambushed, Dal had prowled about the ranch, searching for clues—clues that decidedly were non-existent—and keeping strict tabs on the S-Bar-S gang. There simply were no other logical suspects. Walt had been surly and silent, but he had no real enemies so far as anyone knew. There were rumors that both he and Jim had once been mixed up in a Colorado range war. But that had been long ago.

And now that the Slagle spread, with the exception of Pete Saunders, had been definitely eliminated as possibilities, what was left to go on? For Pete had prodded dogies with Jake Slagle for ten years and for Jake's father before him; had been playing penny-ante in the bunkhouse when Walt, riding home from town, had met the Nemesis, and anyhow was not the killer type. Dal was convinced that Pete was not the man.

Pop Stanton hemmed and hawed, said little that was succinct, and seemed barren of suggestions. Dal got an impression he was edging out from under, leaving the issue and responsibility up to his subordinate. This, under the circumstances, was not unnatural, but it impelled Dal to keep to himself the only items of concrete evidence he had unearthed.

It was not until he gained the privacy of his own room at Ma Blandon's, on the outskirts of the little cowtown, that he drew from his pocket the red-spotted bit of pasteboard Jim's dead fingers had clutched so desperately.

It was a playing-card, the king of diamonds. The back design showed it was from an ordinary deck—a cheap popular type sold by the hundred throughout the State.

Carefully Dal placed it on the table before him, and once more reaching into his vest pocket produced another card, also a king of diamonds, and an exact mate to the first, save that a dull brown stain

was smeared diagonally across it. This card had been dropped beside Walt Mullins' body, and the stain was his life blood.

THE pasteboards linked the killings together. More, they indicated the crimes had been perpetrated by a deliberate killer with a queer quirk in his mind, perhaps an overweening vanity. Dal grinned wryly at the recollection of Pete's excited gibbering about a ghost. Ghosts didn't ply bowie knives, or drop calling cards beside their victims' bodies!

Dal, although a mere range sleuth, was not immune to modern ideas. From a bureau drawer he took a small bottle of black powder, a fine camel's hair brush, and a magnifying glass. But when he'd scattered the powder on the latest find, brushed it deftly in, and plied the glass, he sat back with a low grunt of annoyance. Out of luck again! He'd handled this card even more carefully than the first, to preserve fingerprints, and there was none whatever.

After all, though, wasn't this fact more significant than if there had been? It meant that the killer was a devil with sufficient cunning to consider even minor details, and provide himself with gloves! Which also meant that he knew of Dal's fingerprint hobby, too.

The young man sagged deep in his chair, staring abstractedly at the two cards before him, once more mentally reviewing every circumstance of the brutal crimes.

Walt Mullins hadn't been quite dead when they found him. Very near the end he was. Helpless. Unconscious. But whispering over and over, in a tone of abject amazement, something Slagle had interpreted as, "Ride him! Ride him!" Then, as the ranch boss bent over his body, Walt's head had twitched back. His face had twisted in a ghastly grin as he exclaimed clearly, "*Some* bronco!" and therewith passed into the great beyond.

Yes, Walt had seen something so monstrous, so insanely ridiculous that the picture had filled his dying brain to the exclusion of all else.

Pete Saunders had seen something, too. No doubt of it. And something both lively and articulate, for it had not only made for Pete in "thutty-foot" bounds, but had emitted an "ongodly" yell.

What sort of thing could fill these specifications, deal murderous knife thrusts, yet leave no slightest trace of its approach or flight?

Dal shook his head, as though to clear away figments of delusion which assailed it, blinked perplexedly, and once more set himself to tackle the array of preposterous and apparently conflicting facts.

For an hour he sat buried in profound reflection, moving only to roll and light an endless succession of cigarettes.

But at last, with the stars paling and pre-dawn greyness in the sky, a theory began to form, dimly and vaguely, out of the nebula.

THE deputy ate a belated breakfast at the Bon Ton Cafe, then drifted along to the Spider, the town's largest and most popular wet spot.

Slagle, the S-Bar-S boss, was there, enough liquor in him to make him harsh if not ugly. He was arguing with a long, lank cowman by the name of Bannister.

The *hombre* owned the neighboring ranch, and laid staunch claim to a section of the creek which for several hundred yards formed their mutual boundary. The controversy over water rights had long been more or less amicable, but certainly was not so at the moment. The men were so hotly absorbed in each other they

didn't notice Dal, even when he stepped up to the bar.

"They ain't gonna be no more argument!" exclaimed Bannister. "Yuh are dead right about that, Jake! I done all the palaverin' I intend tuh. Actin' neighborly with yuh don't get a jasper anywhere!"

"Meanin'?" drawled Slagle suggestively, with narrowing eyes.

"That I done got me a clever lawyer, over at Bozeman, an' he'll prod some good sense into yuh. Thass what!"

"A law suit, huh? A lot that'll get yuh, Bannister!" Jake snapped. "D'yuh think I ain't protected legally?"

"Yeah?"

"Ye-ah! I done had that title cleared up six months ago. Every inch o' the creek bottom belongs to me. I wasn't aimin' to get hard about it, but since yuh've started bein' so da-goned clever, it's all right with me. Take yore medicine an' like it."

"Yeah?" reiterated the lean cowman, his voice this time half a snarl. "We'll see about that, Slagle! Take my medicine? Shore I'll take it! But be careful *yuh* don't get a double dose!"

BEFORE Slagle could frame an answer, Bannister stalked angrily away.

Eyes flashing, a flush mounting to his temples, Slagle took a quick step after him; repressed an obvious impulse for instant battle, and turned back morosely to his glass.

Dal walked from the bar to the table in the rear corner where young Banning sat hunched over his inevitable solitaire.

"Howdy, Spider. Sounds like Jake and Bannister are liable to start a shore-'nough argument some day, huh?"

"More'n that," murmured the Spider. Poor devil! There was something abnormal, wistful about his voice—a mere husky whisper. Some childhood horror—accident or crime, no man knew—had turned Spider into a repulsive monstrosity. Not even his sight had escaped mutilation, for there was now no more than a puffy wrinkle where the right eye had been. "I'm thinking it's blood on the moon for those two *hombres*, Fogarty," he went on.

The deputy gave him a somewhat startled glance. Young Banning, like many another human set apart from his fellows, was credited with the gift of prophecy.

"Aw, heck, Spider—"

Once again the wave of pity which sight of that head, bulging enormously above the stunted, twisted body in the wheel-chair, always inspired in him, swept over Dal. He cut off suddenly.

Spider! How cruel human beings were, even with their trenchant nicknames! And how sturdy the spirit within that maimed carcass, doomed to the lifelong slavery of the invalid's chair, which had accepted the monicker without whine or rancor—yes, even bestowed it smilingly upon his own establishment!

"An' mostly alcohol behind it," Banning continued, not appearing to note Dal's awkward hesitation. Nor did his one good eye cease its beady roving to and fro upon the cards before him. "I sometimes wish I didn't have to sell the cursed stuff."

"Aw, blazes," mumbled Dal again. "They'd always get it some place." He changed the subject diplomatically. "Yuh heard about Jim Graves, I reckon?"

"With the S-Bar-S spread in here all morning tankin' up? Oh, yes. I heard, all right."

"Does Helen know?"

"No. I haven't had the nerve to tell her. Why don't yuh tell her, Fogarty?"

"Mebbe I will," agreed the deputy.

At the bar, Slagle downed another slug of whiskey. All at once he stalked out, glancing neither to the right nor left.

Dal watched his departure abstractedly, then sank into a chair opposite the Spider. It occurred to him, suddenly, that the corner behind the cripple seemed strangely vacant.

"Hello!" he exclaimed. "Where's Violet today?"

"Home." The Spider's swift, restless fingers continued to turn and place the cards. "She's off her feed, I guess."

"'Sfunny," Dal chuckled, "to see yuh without that big pooch for a background."

He rose.

"Reckon I'll drop in at the house after supper, big boy, if it's all right with yuh."

"Why me? I don't imagine yuh're comin' on my account, are yuh? Never mind. I'm kiddin', fella. Glad to have yuh. I'll see yuh prob'bly when I git home at ten o'clock."

"Shore," Dal nodded. "See yuh later, big boy."

CHAPTER III

The Red King

HELEN BANNING was slim, blond, and vivacious, a sight for sore eyes to look upon. She appeared to identify Dal by the click of his bootheels on the wooden stoop, for the door opened swiftly, letting a fan of lamplight spread across the porch, and her gay voice welcomed him.

"Hello, stranger! Haven't seen you for ages—well, at least a week. Where've you been?"

"Workin'," said Dal.

"Oh! Looking for the—the beast who killed Walt Mullins, I suppose?"

"Yep. An' a trifle more, ma'am."

She sobered. "Well, come on in, sit down, and unstrap your hardware. Now then, Dal; tell me what you mean. I have a hunch that it isn't pleasant. Fact is, I've felt sort of depressed all day."

"It's in the air, I reckon," Dal said. "Yuh haven't been to town, huh?"

"Why, no."

He nodded. "Else yuh'd of heard. Somebody got Jim Graves out on the Slagle place last night."

"My God!" Her red lips quivered, but she mastered them courageously. "Oh, Dal, how terrible! Why—how—"

"A knife. The same way Walt was killed, an' danged near at the same spot."

"Oh, Dal! And you—you haven't any clue? Any idea who did *this*, either? Dal! You've got to be careful. If—"

Her hand closed on his for a moment.

His eyes widened. Could he believe—

He stared at her intently, flushed, and looked hastily away. When presently he spoke again his voice had become deliberately casual:

"Yeah, I'll be careful, lady. Uh-huh, I shore will!"

"Good grief!" exclaimed Miss Banning hastily. "Poor Violet! I was just going to feed her when I heard you coming, and it completely slipped my mind. Here, cowboy. Into the kitchen and light the lantern, while I dig up the medicine Ben left for that dog. He's afraid she's got worms or something. Dear little midget! I should say it was more likely to be snakes!"

"Yeah. An' each one with ten rattles an' a button," agreed Dal, jumping to his task.

The flickering light-splash of the lantern, in the girl's hand, while Dal carried a dishpan piled high with meat and table scraps, illumined

their way across the backyard to the structure which in earlier times had stabled several horses, but now served solely as a spacious apartment for the Spider's cherished pet.

"Huh!" observed the young man. "I shouldn't say a quarter of raw meat or so was good fer a pi-oodle that's got worms."

"She hasn't, really, if you ask me," declared Helen. "It's just a fit of girlish temperament. All we females have them, you know." She slid open the well oiled door. "Isn't that right, Violet?"

A chain clanked. From the cavernous maw of the stable issued a deep, throaty rumble like distant thunder, only more harsh and ominous. Louder it welled as the two stepped inside.

"Hush, Violet!" rebuked the girl. "Don't be foolish. It's only Dal Fogarty. You know him!"

INTO the radius of pallid light filtered a blurred and grotesque shadow. Violet was undoubtedly no beauty, but nevertheless impressive, if through sheer bulk alone. She was part mastiff, part Great Dane; a hybrid unique in the annals of Grizzly and all regions contiguous. Certainly she outweighed her stunted master at least fifty pounds. A queer, fantastic tableau the two formed together, although somehow no one ever smiled at it.

"There," murmured Helen. "That's better! Put down the pan, Dal, and take a good look at her. Sweet angel! Does she look seriously indisposed to you?"

Dal walked closer to the big animal. Violet didn't like that at all. A new rumble, half ugly menace, half bleating protest, boiled from her saliva-dripping jaws. She raised blood-flecked eyes, seeming to combat the calm, level glance of the young man directed upon her, then sullenly gave it up.

"Where's the medicine?" Dal asked.

"Mixed in the food," said Helen. "Did you think I was going to try to dose her with a spoon? Silly! I asked you if the chit looked really sick."

"Nope," said Dal slowly. "Nope—but she ain't welcomin' callers none tonight, Helen." He shifted his eyes gravely from the sprawled animal to the girl. "Suppose we leave her to massacre that cow in peace."

"*Bueno.* As you desire, *senor.*"

They went back to the house, sat down, tried to talk. The girl strove valiantly to shake off her mood of dejection by animated chatter. But her lightness was all too plainly forced.

The key to which her senses were pitched became manifest when she cut off abruptly in the middle of a sentence, her eyes veering tensely to the porch window.

"What is it?" Dal whispered.

"*Sh-h!*" She sat stiffly upright another moment, then relaxed with a sigh of relief. "It's only Ben."

Dal had caught no sound whatever. She smiled at his expression of astonishment.

"You'll hear him boost his chair up the stoop runway in a second—there! It's a matter of pride with him to wheel himself unassisted from the saloon right to his room. That's why he sleeps downstairs—so's he can have his own entrance from the gallery. Poor Ben!"

Dal glanced toward the doorway, but the cripple didn't appear. He looked up to find Helen watching him inquiringly, and murmured:

"He said he'd drop in and say howdy."

She shook her head. "Don't think we'll see him tonight, Dal. He's gone straight to his room." Her gaze flickered momentarily to a wall, scarce more than a lath partition, behind the deputy. "He's prob'bly

dead-tired. Ben isn't strong, you know."

"Uh-huh," agreed Dal sympathetically.

He too seemed all at once imbued with something of the girl's preoccupation, so that henceforward the conversation lagged.

They struggled on for some time, though; until at length Dal exclaimed, with a new access of energy:

"By golly! Here I'm visitin' the best little cook in Grizzly County, an'—"

The soft laugh with which she interrupted was wholly spontaneous. "Aha! I might have known it was my doughnuts that really attracted you! False *caballero!* It's just as well I made a fresh batch yesterday. Coming right up, Dal. And some red-hot coffee, too."

She vanished kitchenward, lightly as a feather.

Dal had risen from his chair, as though to follow her. But halfway to the door, he halted, turned, and stood a moment as though in silent thought.

Presently he moved again. But not back toward the chair. Two long steps, so quiet his spurs scarcely jingled, carried him almost to the left wall of the room.

Again he halted. And now it was as though, suddenly, a cog had slipped in his usually level brain; as though a wave of insanity suddenly had clutched him. Low but clearly his voice rose as though addressing Helen—albeit she was no longer in the room.

"Shore hate to leave yuh," he stated earnestly. "But I'll have to be going pretty *pronto.* Uh-huh. And I've still got to ride out to the S-Bar-S tonight, da-gone it! Yep, business. An' it won't wait."

With that he returned casually to his chair, where the girl, reappearing presently with a tray of coffee and doughnuts, found him sprawled comfortably.

He did full justice to her offering, wiping his mouth inelegantly with the back of his hand, and regarded her gravely.

"Helen," he said very softly, "I wish yuh'd go right up to bed as soon as I pull out. Will yuh?"

"Of course, Dal. I think I'll be able to sleep at that. You—you've helped me a lot. Honestly."

"That's grand."

He rose. With one firm sweep his lean arms gathered her in.

He kissed her full on the lips once—and was gone.

The deputy's star-faced pony stood in a patient three-legged hump at the Spider hitch-rack. He slapped its neck caressingly as he passed.

The saloon was doing a land-office business, but the lean form of Slagle was nowhere visible in the haze of swirling smoke.

"Pulled out, I reckon," a moon-faced barkeep answered Dal's casual inquiry.

"How long since, Pete?"

"Dunno. 'Bout five-ten minutes, seems like."

"Much obliged, Pete."

Unhurriedly Dal passed once more between the swinging doors. Then his detachment vanished. Three swift strides and he was aboard the star-face, prodding the little animal along the dusky street.

SWIFTER and swifter the pace grew, as they forged out of town. The tang of sage replaced the fetid, alcohol-laden atmosphere. The purple haze of the rangeland succeeded the dull blackness of the human settlement. In the dome of heaven the myriad silver medallions of the starlight shed a far more serene radiance than the sputtering lamps and lanterns of the town.

Head bent vigilantly forward, eyes peering keenly beneath the *sombrero*

brim, Dal sent his animal flying toward the S-Bar-S. His face was altogether tense now. His brows were knitted with something strangely akin to sheer anxiety.

Confound Slagle! He'd never left so early before—on his nights in town—

The pony's hoofs drummed turf across a hilltop and down the reverse slope. Ahead loomed another gentle incline.

AGAINST the skyline of this abruptly splashed a vague form. Only momentarily was the blurred silhouette visible against the pallid horizon, yet Dal's eyes caught it, and the man exhaled a sigh of actual relief. At last. It must be Slagle. His agitation had been needless; plumb nonsensical!

He reined in his mount to keep from overriding the lean cowman. Slagle was taking it easy, judging from the leisurely splash of his pony through the creek ford a hundred yards or so ahead. As Dal sent his animal also through the water, then past the tragic clump of cottonwoods, and trailed the cowman deep into his own property, the grimness of his features relaxed.

With a scant half mile separating Slagle from the S-Bar-S ranchhouse Dal almost sheepishly pulled the star-face to a complete halt.

At that instant, as sharp and tearing in the great pool of silence as the crack of doom, bit the explosion of a six-gun.

Again and again the whole range seemed to quiver with revulsion as a second and third gun-blast galvanically followed the first.

At the third echoing report Dal's spurs raked sharply along his pony's sides. The startled animal bounded wildly forward. Breakneck it cleaved the ominous darkness, its rider hunched rigidly in the saddle, revolver in hand.

A mass of shadow seemed suddenly to leap before him; swirled squarely athwart his path. It was a black horse, mad with panic, rearing awesomely. Its descending forelegs dealt the star-face a glancing blow which flung the smaller horse off balance. At full tilt it crashed sidewise to the ground, rolled over and over, and subsided, wheezing pathetically.

Dal was shot clear of the saddle by the brutal impact, described a giddy arc, and landed on his shoulder in a clump of sage.

His senses were reeling, but a bubbling groan from somewhere near him induced a desperate fight for self-control. He clenched his teeth, struggled upright, and staggered toward the sound.

The ray of the flashlight, snatched from beneath his shirt, swayed fitfully in his trembling hand. It flickered across the body of a man sprawled face downward; returned, and steadied as Dal lunged half-swaying forward.

The body was that of Slagle. The soggy moisture already clotting his sparse hair above a small, black hole near the temple told its own story.

The light flicked out. Dal straightened, gun-hand taut, peering slit-eyed about him. From far in the distance came the drum of Slagle's bolting pony. Nearer at hand Dal's mount, back on its feet now, still wheezed laboriously. There was no other sound.

Again the light-ray stabbed from Dal to the sprawled body of the cowman. A splash of white and crimson, a few inches beyond Slagle's outflung, clutching hand, showed in its glow. Dal stooped, gathered in a small object, and for an instant stared at it intently.

The red king, from a deck of playing cards. The king of hearts!

"Hell!" he exclaimed softly after a moment.

A grim, mirthless smile shone briefly in his eyes as he tucked the pasteboard in a short pocket, where already two red kings reposed.

CHAPTER IV

Death Rides

DAL straightened the contorted limbs of the dead man, and disengaging Slagle's six-gun from his right hand, twirled the cylinder. One shot had been fired.

Dal slid the weapon into the cowman's holster, and dragged the inert body well back from the trail.

For a moment he stood beside it in thoughtful silence. With a slight nod, then, he flung a leg across the saddle of his star-face, but instead of continuing toward the S-Bar-S ranchhouse, swung the animal once more in the direction of town.

Slagle's outfit, once the black horse reached home, would come galloping hot-foot, Dal knew, and find the body of their owner. It wasn't necessary to notify them. And anyway the deputy sheriff, just then, had something far more vital to do.

His departure, however, was not hurried. The pony, limping a little on its left off leg, ambled along leisurely, nor did Dal induce it to a greater speed. Indeed he seemed suddenly to have plunged into a deep abstraction. And yet about him too there was a sense of readiness, of extreme watchfulness.

The heavy blackness of the creek underbrush arose before him. The pony raised its head, snorted violently, and halted.

"Git on," murmured Dal.

Twice more the animal swung its head from side to side, the air whistling through its dilated nostrils, but the prod of bit and spurs mastered its strange reluctance. It jogged on again, past the clump of cottonwoods —the thicket near which Graves' body had been found.

The shadows beyond it seemed suddenly to boil together, leap to life. A mass of blackness was swept together, towered high—higher and higher, and in a jerky flash of motion spat from the murk-pool into the open, star-bathed range.

Snorting and trembling, Dal's pony backed violently away. A startled grunt burst from the deputy.

"The doom rider! Great Gawd!"

He curbed his mount unwittingly, mechanically, the while his eyes stared at this insane eruption of the night.

A fantastic—a weird, incredible vision—truly, neither man nor horse, yet a vague, pigmy combination of both of them! Back and forth it wove, in great, unwieldly bounds; in a series of rolling twitches and gyrations that seemed to foil the pallid starlight, that spun a cloak of added mystery about its horrid shape, yet never for an instant revealed it in distinct outline.

Then, with Dal still staring rigidly, as eerily and uncannily as it had erupted from the gloom, the apparition vanished, flashing into the far depths of the cottonwoods.

"Whe-ew!"

Dal wiped the beads of perspiration from his face. His body relaxed.

Instantly it once more snapped rigid. From deep within the tree clump had seeped a low, flat voice:

"Help! Help!"

The deputy's jerk swung the horse back almost upon its haunches. Again he stared into the darkness fixedly.

"Help! Help!"

The maw of blackness seemed to have wailed that spectral summons. No rustle, no trace of motion was now visible amid the shadows whence it had come.

In one rippling motion Dal was out of the saddle and darting forward.

"Hi, there! Who's callin' me?"

"This way! Oh, God! I'm dying!"

It was as though Dal suddenly identified that pathetic voice. He bounded onward at redoubled speed. His flashlight leaped into his hand, its ray licking ahead of him into the underbrush.

Then he saw it: the dark mass of a small, distorted body, humped there before him as limply as a bag of grain. Ben Banning!

"Gawd!" The single word burst from the deputy's taut throat like a pistol shot.

"I—I'm hurt, Bannister. Come here."

Bannister! Yet the mistake was natural, and the deputy, without bothering to correct it, started forward, to bend solicitously over the cripple's humped form.

"Where'd it get yuh, fella?"

"In the side. Look."

The Spider's left hand closed over Dal's right wrist, pulling him down and over until the deputy's broad shoulders were scant inches from the ground.

"Here," he said. "It hurts me—but not as much as *this* is going to hurt you!"

The flat voice rose to a mad shriek of triumph. The Spider's frail body jerked with sudden action; swift as light his right hand, hidden beneath him, flicked out as a rattler strikes. Steel glinted in the starlight as a knife-blade whipped venomously at Dal's back.

BUT equally as swift was Dal's dodge and parry. His left fist cracked against the Spider's descending arm, with splendid timing, so sharply that the murderous weapon jarred from Banning's clutch and whirled away.

"Nope, fella," drawled Dal. "Nothin' doin'. Yuh've done tried that once too often. The third time is the charm."

The Spider's answer was a frenzied, purling scream, which licked into the blackness as harrowingly as the wail of a banshee.

It evoked strange results. From farther within the bushes came an unearthly answer.

Once more a monstrous shadow detached itself from the others.

Unreal, fantastic, and blood-curdling, it came bounding forward, straight at Fogarty. But this shadow was not silent. The snarls that welled slavering from its jaws, between its flashing fangs, spoke of utter hate and ferocity.

Abruptly that uproar burst asunder. One biting crash of a six-gun, and the dreadful, bounding shadow toppled over and threshed clumsily upon the ground.

Again Dal's Colt spat its challenge. The threshing subsided.

"Violet! Violet!" shrieked Spider Banning frantically. "*Here,* Violet!"

Dal, who had jumped away from him to draw his gun, peered into the darkness, hunched and ready. But the wild charge of the great dog had been definitely halted. Its vast bulk and primal savagery were a threat no more.

A long-drawn and ineffably piteous whimper was its last answer to its master—a whimper that dwindled into an almost human, bubbling sigh, and was still forever.

"Violet!" cried Banning once more.

Then, with a spasmodic contortion he gained his feet.

"Murderer! Murderer!" he shrieked convulsively at Fogarty. His hands, upraised, clawed wildly at the air. "Murderer! I should have killed you first! You devil! You devil!"

The throes of a passion so wild it was unearthly for a moment held him upright, overcame his paralyzed

limbs, his ugly deformities. He lunged at Fogarty.

The deputy jerked back instinctively, appalled by the horrible paroxysm. The starlight shone full on his face.

"My God, it's Dal Fogarty!" Banning gasped.

He slumped to the ground, moaning, rocking to and fro.

"Yuh thought—I was Bannister—" Fogarty seemed to hear his own words coming from far away.

"Yes. There were three of 'em—Mullins and Graves and Bannister. They killed my Dad—back in Colorado—threw me outa the wagon they'd bushwacked Dad from, and run over me with both wheels. That's what made me—like I am. I've been waiting—waiting—waiting to get 'em all. I left those kings so they'd know the ones that were still to die."

"I see," said Fogarty gravely. "Too bad yuh got Slagle by mistake, tonight, Ben."

"Slagle, hell! The man that drilled him was Bannister! I was out on Bannister's trail—I saw it all. And I was layin' for him to come back, but he must've ridden across the prairie. That's why I was so sure it was him when I spotted you, Dal."

He shuddered, his eyes rose appealingly to Fogarty's in the glare of the flashlight.

"I—I wouldn't have harmed you, Dal," he muttered. "I was sort of—countin' on you to take care of Helen. When I'm gone—and I'm goin'—now—my heart—"

He sprang suddenly to his feet.

"Oh God! If I could only have waited till I got Bannister!" he cried. "But I will—*will*—I'll—get—him—yet—"

His hands fastened upon Dal's shoulders, they jerked suddenly loose, flashed to his own throat. A spume of froth welled from his working lips.

Once more a shudder passed over his body. It stiffened rigidly. Without a sound, then, the Spider slumped downward, sprawled in a twisted, lifeless huddle at Dal's feet.

THE deputy stooped and felt for his heart. It was silent in the misshapen breast. Nature had exacted her own punishment, her own retribution, far more sternly than man-made law.

Dal paused beside the body a moment, then straightened, and with the back of his hand wiped off the sweat beads that studded his forehead. His eyes gleamed with new decision.

He strode over to the pool of shadow which mantled the carcass of the great hybrid dog. From its broad back he deftly removed a small, peculiar saddle. It was the mark of this upon the beast's shaggy backbone which that evening had confirmed to Dal the identity of the doom-rider. He'd thought then that Banning had some secret feud with the S-Bar-S, which was why Dal had followed Slagle.

Dal bore the Spider's body and the saddle to his mount, and crawled aboard the reluctant star-face with some difficulty.

On the far side of the creek was a deep arroyo filled with underbrush. Into the depths of this Dal flung the saddle which Banning had ridden to his midnight kills, and after it the Spider's ugly knife. Then he cut back swiftly to the Grizzly trail.

The Spider Saloon was still doing a roaring trade when Dal Fogarty once more stepped within its doors.

Between two punchers, at the crowded bar, stood the cowman, Bannister.

Dal nodded grimly to himself. Check again. Bannister's natural course would be to make tracks for the most conspicuous place in Grizzly, as nearly as possible to establish

an alibi. Dal strolled forward, tapped the cowman on the shoulder and murmured:

"H'ya, Bill. Like tuh have a word or so with yuh."

Bannister started, looked around uneasily, but followed the officer without protest beyond the threshold of the place.

"Well, Fogarty, what's on yore mind?"

"Seems-like yuh rode over the S-Bar-S," averred Dal levelly, "the night Walt Mullins was killed. Didn't yuh?"

"How should I know?" Bannister fairly snapped the question, but caught himself and added calmly: "I been over to chew the fat with Slagle several times lately. Pers'nal business, if yuh must know!"

"Uh-huh," Dal nodded. "But it's the night Mullins was knifed that I'm referrin' tuh."

"Meanin' yuh think *I* killed him?"

"Oh, no, Bill. I don't mean that. I know yuh didn't. But I've got a hunch yuh passed by, right close to the body, before anyone else did. Yeah. An' saw the playing-card the killer tossed beside it. A red king. Here—like this."

UNDER Bannister's eyes, in the dim radiance trickling through the doors and windows, he held the card he had retrieved from Mullins' body—one of the diamond kings.

The cowman pulled away, a flood of unnatural color suffusing his thin cheeks.

"What the devil yuh sayin', anyway?"

"I reckon yuh heard me, Bill!"

"Well—what if I *did* see Walt's body?" rapped Bannister.

"Nothin'. Not that, Bill." The deputy's voice was still casually emotionless. "Only it gave yuh a brilliant idea. Yuh used that idea t'night, Bill, on a *hombre* who was aimin' to ruin yuh, only yuh balled it up some.

"Yuh see, Bannister, the fella who did those first two killings was a madman. He looked an' acted sane enough, most times, but jest the same he was plumb loco, on one point. And bein' mad, he had a queer sense of humor. That card king, to leave a real clue for whoever has brains to dope it out correctly, was his cute little joke. A sorta warnin'—and a threat.

"Pretty good—on his part. But here's where *yuh* went wrong, Bannister. This killer had only one eye. And so, just using a red king wasn't enough for him. It had to be the king of diamonds. Know why? Take a good look, Bannister. It's the only one-eyed king. The king of hearts—don't qualify. And that's where—"

He cut off abruptly, hand flashing swiftly, surely, like a streak of lightning for his gun.

But Bannister managed to retain some of his advantage. His Colt had leaped out of the holster almost before his backward lunge and pouncing motion impelled Dal to draw.

Even so the weapons crashed close together; so close the shots seemed to blend.

A red-hot poker seared Fogarty's gun-arm, the impact jerking the muzzle of his Colt erratically. Not soon enough, however, to keep the lead messenger that had whipped out of the weapon from ripping squarely through Bannister's chest.

The cowman slumped to the wooden sidewalk.

There was a muffled chorus of excited shouts, a drum of racing feet, and a froth of men burst through the saloon doorway. They pulled up, staring curiously.

"Jack Slagle was killed tonight," Dal stated quietly, "and Bannister did it. Reckon he knew something about Graves and Mullins, too. He

pulled his gun on me while I was questionin' him."

He removed the Colt from his numb right hand, with his left, and slid it awkwardly into the holster.

"You—Jim Connors—take charge of the body, will yuh? Get somebody to help yuh tote it over to the jail. I'll be there presently—"

He vanished amid the shadows of the street, rounded a corner, and presently regained his pony. With Spider's body, which he had cached near the animal, once more slung across the saddle bow, he betook himself unhurriedly and very quietly to the Banning house.

Instead of halting at the gate, he circled the frame building. In a particularly black pool of shadows he dismounted. A moment later, with the contorted body of the cripple dangling in his good left arm, he paddled silently into the spacious barn.

The Spider's wheel-chair was there, in a corner. Gently Dal lowered the body of Ben Banning into it, paused an instant in sad reflection, then eased himself silently back into the night.

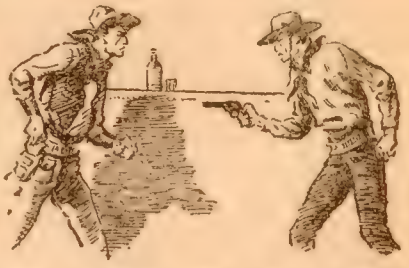
"She'll find him. Heart-failure," he muttered. "Better so."

The soft pad of the star-face once more seeped from the dusty highway.

At the corner of the frame house, where Helen's room was—where the girl even now lay sleeping—Dal pulled up an instant, swept his *sombrero* from his head, and bowed low in the saddle with amazing gracefulness.

"It don't matter to the world a feather," he murmured, "if Bill Bannister gets the blame for three murders or just the one he done. But it sure matters plenty to me — and yuh. Yeah—good night, an' Gawd bless yuh, girl."

When Trail-Weary Keno Ed McGee Steps Into the Saloon at Mimbres, Arizona, Hell Pops Loose in



DEADLINE RIDE

A Complete Book-Length Novel

By FORBES PARKHILL

Author of "Devil's Tally Book," "Hell-Bent Waddy," etc.

Also HANGTOWN GUNS, a Payday Parker Novelette by SYL MacDOWELL — and Many Other Yarns in Next Month's Issue of THRILLING WESTERN

Love Thy *Neighbor*

A Hooker Bros. Story

"Let me outta here before I choke to death!"

A Fine Piece of Sentiment Comes Danged Near Wrecking Johnny Hooker's Outfit at Canyon Lobo!

By GRANT TAYLOR

Author of "All Bull," "Hornswoggled Hero," etc.

THERE'S times when it's right nice tuh have neighbors, but me, Johnny Hooker, head o' the cow firm o' Hooker Brothers here in Canyon Lobo, has found out it's nicer sometimes not tuh have 'em.

Any time our neighbors need help they lopes over tuh Hooker Bros., knowin' we'll be right there all same as a poddy calf at milkin' time.

Us Canyon Lobo saddle pounders don't mind doin' li'l deeds o' lovin' kindness fer neighbors, but when they results in buckshot and lynch

ropes headin' our way, it's goin' too golrammed far.

Yessir, me, Johnny Hooker, an' my li'l brother Stevie, an' our cowhand, "One-Ton" Benson, we ain't as neighborly as we oncet was. Specially that big lunk of a cowhand One-Ton. There oncet was a time when One-Ton was so neighborly he'd ride fu'ther tuh turn a neighbor's cow than he would one o' our'n, 'specially if said cow belonged to a female neighbor. If something in skirts jist looked that fat cowboy's way, he'd bust his leg gittin' started tuh help her out.

WHICH weakness makes me guess it's some neighborly act o' mercy One-Ton's on when he lopes up tuh the corral one evenin' an' starts ropin' him a fresh horse.

"What's eatin' yuh?" I asks. "We ain't standin' no night guard tonight."

"Which it's dang lucky yuh ain't, Johnny," he returns. "Else yuh'd be short a hand. Me, I got a li'l chore tuh do fer a neighbor."

Which makes me plumb wringy. Here this big hunk o' beef he's allus kickin' up clouds o' dust on jobs fer somebody else, but I got tuh tail him up every mornin' an' prod him out tuh the corral tuh start work we're payin' him tuh do.

"Me, not bein' no neighbor, only jist the fella that signs yore pay checks, I guess I'm jist unlucky," I says sarcastic. "I got a notion tuh make yuh turn loose that horse an' bed down fer the night so's yuh won't have tuh be dragged out in the mornin'."

"Shore," yelps One-Ton. "That's the kind o' neighbors Johnny and Stevie Hooker is—same as Piute Injuns. Yuh'd let a widder woman starve, yuh marble-headed, chinchy, tight-fisted, sour-faced pelicans. Here Miz Gushett has lost two o' her milk cows when she come down from her summer camp up in the Rinconada, and her children is a-cryin' down there fer milk. And this inhooman horntoad of a Johnny Hooker with a heart big as a pinhead, he's afraid one o' his horses'll git sweated up a li'l."

"Hol' on," I says. "Whyn't yuh say what was wrong in the fu'st place. The Widder Gushett, hey? Turn that bronc back in the corral till we go in an' git some chuck. We'll need grub goin' way back up in that Rinconada country huntin' them cows. An', besides, we ought tuh—"

"Where do yuh git all them 'we's'?" bellers One-Ton. "It don't take no whole roundup crew an' a chuck wagon tuh gather in a couple milk cows. I kin handle this job myself. Jist account that widder is goodlookin' yuh git neighborly all of a sudden."

"That's no way to talk," I says. "An' I wasn't thinkin' how goodlookin' the widder is. I was thinkin' o' them starvin' children."

"Which, if yuh gits down tuh it, they ain't only one children, an' he drinks coffee 'stead o' milk," says One-Ton.

"Two heads is better'n one, anyway," I states. "Yuh an' me will git chuck an' pull out 'fore my li'l brother Stevie pops in and raises hell. He'd say we was tryin' tuh run off from work. He'd claim that we was a pair o' saddle bums what had found a excuse tuh drift back up in the hills an' lay around under the trees. Stevie's narrer-minded that way."

"I'm narrer-minded the same way, too," puts in our cook, old George. "Yuh loafers better look out among all them golrammed Rinconada nesters. Yuh're liable tuh git dry-gulched."

Me an' One-Ton don't pay no attenshun to old George. Danger from nesters ain't goin' to stop me and

One-Ton when we're out to help a lone, helpless widder lady what's got a coupla milk cows playin' hooky. An' it would be jist the same even if she wasn't jist about the niftiest lookin' li'l widder on the range.

After old George dumps some *carne* an' beans an' coffee in a sack fer us, me an' One-Ton throws our bed an' the chuck on Pete, our old pack mule, an' hit the trail up-country tuh where the Widder Gushett allus takes her milk herd in the summer.

She's got a li'l cabin up there where me an' One-Ton will camp while lookin' fer them cows.

Reachin' that cabin some time after midnight, we throw our bed an' chuck inside an' rolls in tuh git a li'l sleep 'fore mornin'. Seems like I don't no more'n git one eye closed till a big roan bull steps right in my face an' begins tuh use it as pawin' place. There's things even a goodnatured fella like Johnny Hooker don't stand fer. I comes up outa my snooze, an' r'arin' up, I grab my gun an' whack Mr. Bull on the shins.

"Wow! Oh! Wow!" bellers One-Ton. "Yuh dumb ox, there's a snake in our bed. I been bit six times, an' now yuh done broke both my laigs. Lemme outa here!"

AN' One-Ton he hightails fer the open country, only on the way he runs right straddle o' the door which we'd left about half open. He lets out another bawl an' sets right down in the middle o' the cabin.

Snake in the bed. Huh! That's startlin' news to a fella that's half awake, but it ain't half so startlin' as when that danged snake all a-sudden wrops hisself around my neck. It's jist like that excitable, nervous knothead of a One-Ton, droppin' a snake on a old pal.

I tries t' claw off that snake, headin' for the outdoors, a-yellin' t' One-Ton t' git outa the road. 'Stead o' which he gits up t' start another dash, and the result of his dumbness is we git wedged in the door an' I tear a toenail off plumb down tuh the red 'fore I git through.

Which is all the brain power y' kin expect from a forty-dollar-a-month cowhand.

"Will yuh lemme out o' here 'fore I'm choked tuh death by this serpent?" I bellers. That snake I'm carryin' touches One-Ton an' he plumb loses his head an carries me out with him, fightin' the air and yowlin' like a crazy man as he goes.

In the excitement an' not bein' altogether awake, I run quite a ways until I find out they ain't no snake, an' that I been made a dang fool of by that cowyap of a One-Ton. We both been usin' our saddles fer a piller, an' when that dang fool jumps up, he's kicked my rawhide rope loose from my saddle an' it's fell right down over my head.

"And what a brain storm yuh turned out t' be!" I bawls. "Been ridin' range all yore life an' can't tell a rawhide rope from a snake."

"An' I s'pose a rawhide rope has fangs and kin use 'em like a snake!" he yowls. "I tell yuh I been bit six times, an' I ain't goin' back in that danged cabin till she comes daylight. In fact, I ain't goin' tuh last till daylight!"

The way that doggoned fool talks it gits me tuh thinkin' that mebbe a rattler has took the risk o' bitin' the big lunkhead. We sneak back up tuh the cabin door an' I chucks in a few rocks. A sort o' squeakin' noise comes out which One-Ton swears is a rattler crawlin' under the blankets. He lets fly with his old six-gun, an' it sounds like he's shootin' intuh a whole nest o' tin cans until I got the presents o' mind tuh think it's more likely our cookin' outfit.

Neither one o' us got any matches,

'count o' One-Ton stampedin' outa the cabin without his pants. All we got on is our shirts an' drawers ag'in the cold, an' when it's cold up in the Rinconada country, she freezes the horns off muley cows. Between freezin' t' death and dyin' o' rattler poison, I'll take the freezin'; an' we hops around in our bare feet an' me on that nailless toe o' mine till she come a li'l light. One-Ton he keeps feelin' hisself where he's been bit t' see if he's swellin', but nothin' develops.

Then we rustle a couple o' clubs an' sneak back in the cabin an' begin tuh poke around the bed. Purty soon One-Ton sees something move an' whacks away at it, but when he pokes it out with his stick, it's only a cussed li'l bat.

The critter had crawled in bed with us an' scratched One-Ton with its wing claws.

"Some brave cowboy workin' fer Hooker Bros.!" I says sarcastic. "Lettin' a li'l old bat chase him all over the flats."

"Yeah?" returns One-Ton. "I was a'most as brave as a fella bein' caught chokin' hisself with his own rawhide rope."

But he shuts up right quick when I grabs up my rattler club. They ain't no jughead cowhand goin' to talk back tuh Johnny Hooker. Me and One-Ton, we quit speakin' t' one another until we start breakfast, an' I find One-Ton has shot our coffee pot plumb full o' holes, an' a hole in the bottom of our fryin' pan.

I got a notion tuh peel a ear off'n One-Ton with that skillet, but I restrain m'self. I'm kinda t'blame m'self, fer hirin' sich a weak-minded cowboy.

They ain't no coffee fer breakfast, an' the bacon burns 'count o' the grease all runnin' out through the hole.

Me, I'm feelin' plumb hard tuh git along with, when we ketches our horses an' starts out tuh look around fer the widder's cows. After all, when a neighbor's children, or anyway one kid, is starvin' for milk, or would be if he didn't drink coffee, yuh got tuh overlook a few hardships.

"What brand did the widder say her cows was wearin'?" I asks One-Ton, as I cases that sore toe o' mine in the saddle stirrup.

"Huh, uh," he stutters, scratchin' his head. "Well, uh, I guess I plumb fergot tuh ask her, Johnny."

"There's one thing I'd advise yuh not t' do," I tells him.

"An' what's that?" he fires back mad.

"Don't scratch yore head no more," I tells him. "Yuh're liable to git a lot o' splinters stuck in your hand."

WE drift over through some oak brush an' come out in a li'l flat where there's a bunch o' cow critters grazin'. It's a cinch they belong tuh some of them dry-farmin' nesters what's been fencin' up all the Rinconada country. Easy t' figger that, 'count there's all kinds an' colors.

"I reckon yuh didn't go tuh the trouble either tuh ask the widder what the color o' them cows was," I says.

"Well — uh, uh — yuh know, Johnny," says One-Ton, "I jist figgered all milk cows was either jist black or yeller. Now yuh take them two over there. I betcha them's good milk cows—"

"Yuh're dang right they are, cowboy," says a voice from the brush behind us. Me an' OneTon turned around tuh find ourselfs gazin' down a double-barreled shotgun, which a feller with dirty whiskers all of a foot long is holdin' kind o' easy-like in the crook o' his arm.

"I oughta know how good they

are," he goes on, "bein' I pump the handles on 'em twicet a day."

No whiskered nester is a-goin' tuh talk to Johnny Hooker like that, shotgun or no shotgun, but why start trouble with a weak old man, so I starts explainin' how me an' One-Ton is jist tryin' tuh help out the Widder Gushett.

Which only seems t' make that gazabo more on the peck. "I'm dadblamed certain that big kid o' her'n hazed one o' my best milkers down below when they pulled out," he snorts. "I figger t' hold on tuh any o' her'n that's left up here. Now yuh two cowboys git goin'. Move!"

Well, o' course, no mangy nester c'n talk that way tuh me an' One-Ton.

Either one of us coulda beat that old nester tuh the draw easy, but after all, why start bullyin' a old fella twicet our age when we kin use deeplomacy on the hair-covered buzzard, an' only pertend t' leave?

So me an' One-Ton circles until we run acrost another bunch o' stuff bunched out in a li'l cedar park. There ain't enough different colors made tuh fit that bunch. There's yallers, black, white an' red-spotted, likewise roans an' blues, an' danged if they ain't one a kind o' green. An' all nester stuff—been knocked in the head with the churn dash when they was young. Me an' One-Ton rides around 'em tryin' tuh figger out which might belong tuh Miz Gushett. That's when I gits a idee.

"Say," I asks One-Ton, "did yuh happen tuh think tuh ask the widder if them cows had names? All these fool nester milk cows got pet names, an' if yuh knew what the widder christened 'em, we could jist holler at 'em, like 'Sook, Mabel; sook, Annabelle,' an' they'd jist come a-trottin'."

"A grand idee!" yips One-Ton sarcastic. "Yuh think a female cow comes like a dog when he's called? I don't know what names they go by over here or what their names was back in Texas 'fore the Rangers chased 'em out. All I know is I'm lookin' fer a pair o' cows what's carryin' a bag o' milk around an' lookin' kind o' homesick."

We haze them critters around, sizin' 'em up fer milk stock, till One-Ton gits the halfwit idea o' drivin' 'em over tuh the widder's cabin where we're camped tuh see if a couple won't reckernize the li'l milkin' corral there an' walk in tuh git milked. I don't take a whole lot tuh the idee o' driftin' around critters belongin' to a passle o' hard-eyed, brush-faced nesters what roams about with double-barreled shotguns, but bein' I waded intuh this, I'm seein' 'er through.

WE picks up that lot o' bossy cows and herds 'em over t' the cabin, where we kind o' hang back tuh see if any acts like it was home. Purty soon some brindle critter moseys in the li'l corral tuh start scratchin' its head on the feed rack.

"A wunnerful idee," I says t' One-Ton. "There's one of them cows, 'ceptin' she happens t' be a bull. Run git yore milk bucket."

"Tryin' tuh git funny, ain't yuh?" One-Ton growls. "C'mon; none o' these cows belong t' the widder. We got t' hunt some more."

We fool around all the rest o' the day tryin' tuh figger out what looks like a pair o' lost milk cows, but not bein' able t' read them bovines' minds by the time evenin' comes, we got t' ride back tuh the cabin empty-handed an' hongry as a nursin' maw grizzly an' turn our broncs loose. I don't say nothin' because I can't think o' no words tuh express jist what I'm thinkin'.

I'm rustlin' some wood tuh build a fire when I hear One-Ton let out a

beller an' come stampedin' out o' the cabin.

"Hey, Johnny! We been robbed!" he bawls. "They ain't nothin' left but the old coffee pot what's all shot full o' holes."

I lope over fer a look. Some low-bellied nester has done cleaned us out cleaner'n a duck's back after a hard rain.

It's right then I busts down an' starts in tuh cussin', damnin' nesters both ways from the middle. One-Ton tries tuh git in a few cuss words o' his own, but they sizzle up jist like throwin' a spoonful o' grease on a red-hot stove. Fin'ly I run out o' breath an' set down in the door. I'm madder'n a locoed mule.

"I'm bettin' the thief was that long-whiskered son of a cross-eyed Piute squaw!" I states. "Shotguns an' ten-inch Bowie knives ain't goin' tuh keep me, Johnny Hooker, from gittin' that grub an' cook outfit back."

WE ketch our horses an' circle fer tracks, although it's turnin' t' dusk and the skunk that done the stealin' was careful tuh keep on hard ground. But about a mile from our cabin we come acrost a nester's yard.

They take tuh the brush when we come ridin' up. I figger I'll ride in an' look over the place. I spur right up t' the porch an' I'm jist steppin' down when that old geezer with the whiskers steps out on the porch carryin' that shotgun.

O' course I coulda insisted on searchin' his house fer our chuck an' cook stuff, but mebbe I decides it might be better tuh look somewhere else first an' come back later.

As we ride I see the old gazabo is got a bunch o' hogs fattenin' in a pen, while in t'other corner a whole herd o' goats is millin' around, eatin' all the bark off the cedar posts. Among 'em is a bunch o' fat chickens what would sure look good in a fryin' pan. One-Ton he's sizin' up them pigs, thinkin' I guess about a meal o' ham an' gravy.

It's dark time we git back tuh the cabin, so we build a fire in the fireplace an' hunch up around it tuh keep warm. I'm beginnin' tuh git hungry enough tuh take a bite out of a skunk, an' while One-Ton don't say nothin', it's easy tuh tell he's thinkin' about a slab o' beefsteak. Me, I got a notion tuh saddle up an' ride back tuh the ranch an' fergit all about the Widder Gushett's cows, but that's the trouble with us Hookers—we're pure bulldog breed, an' nobody c'n say we ever throwed up our tail an' quit.

I know dang well if I jist mentioned home, One-Ton would be out saddlin' up 'fore I finished the words, but if we went back empty-handed an' with our blankets an' cook stuff stole on top, that li'l brother Stevie o' mine would sure give us the big laugh.

Nossir, Johnny Hooker stays on a job till she's branded an' earmarked, or else his hide is on the fence. This is jist another one o' them emergencies that me as head of a big outfit is allus bein' called on tuh meet.

Along about midnight we kind o' doze off tuh sleep, but it ain't for long, yuh bet, not with that One-Ton around. The big goof is sprawled out on his back talkin' out loud in his sleep.

"Pass some more o' that steak over here," he orders. "Yuh tryin' tuh starve a fella?" An' then he starts chewin' jist like he's bit off a hunk o' grub. I git afraid mebbe he'll bite off a piece o' his tongue an' swaller it, so I jab him in the ribs with a stick o' wood.

"Come out o' that," I yells. "Where yuh think yuh are—in a Harvey House restraw up on the Santa Fe?"

One-Ton he sets up an' puts his head in his hands. "Golly, I'm so danged hungry I could take a bite out o' my chaps or chew the strings

off my saddle," he wails. "I was dreamin' yuh an' Stevie was hoggin' all the chuck. Huh! Speakin' o' hawgs—"

He looks at me an' I look at him, both of us thinkin' of them fat porks we seen over there in that nester's pen an' them fryin' chickens I seen runnin' around among them goats. I hitch my belt up a coupla notches, takin' up the slack, an' reaches fer my hat.

"It's time we stand up on our hind laigs an' act like men," I orates. "'Stead o' settin' here starvin' like a couple o' lost doods. I'm gittin' back some o' that chuck o' ours, an' it makes me no difference if it's smoked, salted or on the hoof. If yuh got the nerve, yuh kin come along an' see how a Hooker gits even with sneakin' nesters."

"I'll trail along," agrees One-Ton. "Jist how yuh figger tuh collect any chuck?"

It's allus like that. I got tuh do all the thinkin' fer this dumb outfit, else they'd all be on relief.

"Easy," I says. "We ride over tuh this here nester's place. When we git purty clost we tie our broncs back in the brush, slip up tuh that hogpen an' knock one o' them shoats in the head an' cart him off. Mebbe, if we ain't in too big a hurry, we'll git us a few fryin' chickens, too. That galoot stole our grub, an' me, when I'm in Rome I believe in doin' jist like the Romans do."

"Yeah," argues One-Ton, "but them Romans didn't have no scatter-guns loaded with buckshot. What about them squeals an' sqawks them pigs an' chickens lets out?"

"That's up t' us," I tells the dumb hunk o' cowyap. "A hog's gotta sleep like everybody else, ain't he? While he's asleep we jist sneak up an' hit him 'tween the ears so hard there ain't no squeal left."

"It sounds easy tuh hear yuh tell it," says One-Ton. "C'mon, let's go. I hope them hawgs is sound sleepers."

We go saddle our horses an' I rustle around till I find a old dull ax, which I hands tuh One-Ton. This is one time I figger on cashin' in on some o' that big bum's extra muscle. He ought t' be able t' hit a hog so hard there won't be nothin' left but the hams, which is all that's any good about that anamile, anyway.

BUT when I mention I'll let him do the shoat collectin' while I rustle a coupla chickens from the hen house, does he appreciate bein' give the most important job? Not so as yuh could notice!

He begins tuh back off right away, an' I got tuh start explainin' over an' over how lucky he's sich a big, stout feller, else he wouldn't git tuh play the leadin' party in gittin' even with this here nester.

"Fer as that *leadin'* part goes," says One-Ton, "I figger tuh take care o' that the fu'st time I hear Old Whiskers step out o' that house. I'm goin' tuh move so fast I c'd lead a scared roadrunner, an' keep gainin' on it ev'ry jump."

I kin see if I keep on explainin' an' arguin' with that big hunk o' sp'iled meat it'll be daylight 'fore we git started. So I jist fork my horse an' ride off. Lucky the night's darker'n the inside of a bat cave.

We ride down purty clost tuh this old nester's barnyard an' tie our horses in a li'l bunch o' jackpines. I make sure One-Ton has got that old ax, an' then we start sneakin' down tuh the corrals. As we gits closer, that cowardly One-Ton begins tuh hang back, so I figger I'd better hustle t' git it over with.

I steps out brisk until we git tuh the yard, where I stops an' explains how I got this job figgered out.

"We'll work 'er jist like this," I says. "We'll sneak right over there tuh the hogpen an' listen a minute

tuh git 'em located. Then yuh ease yoreself over the fence an' sneak up tuh where them shoats'll all be piled up snoozin'. Yuh kin tell which end the head is on by the snoozin' sounds, an' when yuh git one located, beef him, wham him with everything yuh got, then chop off a ham an' beat it."

"An' jist where'll yuh be all this time?" he wants tuh know.

"Me?" I says. "Why, I'll be doin' the dangerous part o' this job, in the chicken house, pickin' us out a pair o' nice fryin' chickens."

I hustle him along through the dark tuh the hogpen, where we can hear plenty o' snorin'. I give One-Ton a shove, but right there he balks.

"Yuh're danged shore them's hogs in there, are yuh, Johnny?" he whispers, shaky. "Maybe them's goats."

"Goats, hell," I whispers back. "Can't yuh use yore nose? Go on ahead!" An' I give him a li'l push.

"Hey, don't be in such a cussed big hurry," he whispers, hoarse. "I think I dropped my ax."

That's the way it allus is. I go an' make all the plans an' here this is all the cooperation I git. I see I got tuh be firm.

"Git in there!" I growls, low. "Are yuh goin' tuh let it git around that a nester got the best of the Hookers? Where's yore pride?' Which seems tuh build a li'l steam under him, 'cause he slides on down in the pen an' begins tuh sneak over toward that pile o' hogs.

The chicken house ain't more'n fifty feet from there, so I slip on over an' feel around till I find the door. Which shows how easy anything is fer a feller that's got a few brains an' nerve, like me what's calm an' cool as a one hundred-pound chunk o' ice.

I open the door an' slip inside. I'm standin' there still tryin' tuh locate the roosts, when something lets out a squawk right in my ear. Kinda startled in spite o' my cool nerve, I sorta jumps, and the chicken house bein' low, it's only natural I wham my haid ag'in the low roof hard 'nough tuh push my hat down over my eyes. Time I gits set tuh leave there, I know it's nothin' but a cussed rooster that's decided it's time tuh start wakin' folks up.

It takes a whole lot more'n that tuh jar iron nerves like mine, and I feels along the roosts fer one o' them fryin' chickens, when outside I hear somethin' go *whop,* follered immedjiately by a screech that raises the hair on my haid an' starts shivers gallopin' up an' down my back.

Right away I hear a racket over toward that hogpen what sounds like that goof of a One-Ton is chokin' one o' them hogs tuh death with his bare hands, while the rest of the hog's family is raisin' the roof yellin' fer the police. At the same time them chickens start squawkin', so I make a swift grab an' git me a fowl by the neck an' make a jump fer the door.

ABOUT that time I heard a door up at the house open an' I figger we might as well pull out, bein' we got what we come fer.

I'm hightailin' it through the barnyard when that chicken I'm luggin' reaches up an' hangs a couple o' sharp hooks in my arm clear up to his shanks. Looks like I grabbed the old rooster, an' I'm sorta slowin' down tuh have it out with Mr. Rooster, when there's a *boom* from some cannon, and a peck o' buckshot comes whizzin' my direction. One o' my arms give a jerk.

Gawd'lmighty, I thinks at first my arm's shot off plumb up tuh my shoulder. But it's still there and I put on more speed, an' when the fella lets go the other barrel, it's so far back it sounds way off in the distance. At the second *boom* One-Ton stampedes past me an' draws ahead

like I'm standin' still. We hits our broncs an' busts outa there feedin' 'em the spurs ev'ry jump.

"Git yore ham?" I yells.

"Sure," he says. "Git yore chickens?"

"What a Hooker goes after, he allus gits," I says.

Back at the cabin we turn our horses loose an' bust intuh the cabin. The fire's still burnin' in the old fireplace, an' I hold my chicken up tuh have a look.

Holy Pete! All I got is his head an' neck. Them buckshot slugs musta busted him right in the middle. I'm splattered all over with blood an' feathers, an' I got two holes in my arm where the rooster socked them spurs in. I throw his head down, disgusted, an' turn tuh have a look at One-Ton.

He's standin' by the fire lookin' at what he's holdin' in his hand. Steppin' up fer a closer look, I see he's got a hog's tail, cut off purty high up.

Right then and there is where I blow up.

"I knowed this would happen," I bellers. "Didn't I tell yuh jist how tuh hit that danged hog? An' I'll be a lousy son of a locoed sheepherder if yuh don't go an' bust him in the wrong end."

"Jist the same," argues One-Ton, "I brought back jist as much o' my hog as yuh did o' that chicken."

"Shut up!" I tells 'im. "If brains was wuth a millyun dollars a ounce, yuh couldn't buy a sack o' Bull Durham."

They ain't no use in argufyin' with a ivory-headed cowboy. If he'd 'a' used his haid fer somethin' besides keepin' his ears apart in the fu'st place, he'd of asked the widder about what brand them cows was wearin' an' we'd of had 'em an' been gone 'fore now.

We kick that hog's tail in the fire an' foller it with that rooster's head. Somehow I aint half as hungry as I was a while back, but jist the same I figger tuh bust out jist as soon as she's daylight an' round up a couple o' milk cows, any cows, fer the widder, an' beat it back tuh the ranch where I kin have a good feed.

IT'S while we we're saddlin' our horses I notice One-Ton feelin' a li'l nick in his left ear, which I reckon is where a buckshot got him.

"I got it!" he yelps. "I remember now the widder told me them cows didn't have no brand. She jist cuts a li'l notch in their ear. Yep, that's it. I remember it plumb easy."

"The only way yuh could git anything in that haid o' yores," I says, "is have somebody shoot it in, an' then mebbe shoot it out ag'in. C'mon!"

We screws our hulls down on our broncs an' hitches our belt up 'nother notch an' drift out through the brush lookin' fer them lost milk cows. If One-Ton had sense enough tuh remember about the widder notchin' them cows' ears, all we'd 'a' had tuh do the fu'st day woulda been tuh look fer a cow with notches in her left ear, or is it her right?

"H e y," I addresses One-Ton, "which ear them cows got the notch in? Or is that askin' too much?"

"By golly," wails that intellectual giant. "I jist didn't think tuh ask."

"Of course not," I says, smooth an' soft like. "Mebbe if I was t' knock another li'l nick out o' the other ear it'll help out yore memory some." An' after that him an' me quits speakin' tuh one another agin.

It ain't long till we come acrost another bunch o' dry-lander stuff an' circle around lookin' fer cows with a notched ear, I ain't perticular which ear. One-Ton spots a big old brindle sister an' points.

"Betcha that's one o' the widder's cows," he says. "See that big notch in her right ear."

"Yeah," I says, "an I see 'nother notch in her left ear, too. Anyway, we'll rope 'er an' tie 'er up an' go look fer t'other."

I takes down my rope an' builds a loop, while One-Ton bunches 'em up. I'm havin' trouble gittin' her separated from a big old black steer that's actin' like he wants tuh be adopted, an' when fin'ly I flip my rope, it's jist as that cussed steer decides tuh bust past that old cow.

The loop settles over his horns just as purty as yuh ever seen a rodyeo catch.

"What yuh doin'?" bawls One-Ton. "That ain't the right critter."

Me, I'm so peeved I take my dallies on the horn tuh give that steer a bustin' he'll remember till next weanin' time, an' about then I hear One-Ton let out another squall.

"Bust him quick, Johnny, an' git that rope off. Here comes a gang o' nesters."

I look around tuh see a half-dozen fellers horseback lopin' toward us, headed by Old Whiskers with his shotgun. Which is what I c'd expect—trailin' along with a fat lobster of a cowhand. I takes a run on the rope, an' right then I find that cussed steer is one o' them milk-fed pets that's been raised in a corral. 'Stead o' runnin' ag'in the rope, he's been broke tuh lead, an' he trots off follerin' me around. I see this is another of them emergencies I got tuh rise tuh meet or we'll be risin' at the end of a rope.

"Git down yore rope an' hindfoot that danged fool!" I yells at One-Ton, but while we're still millin' around, them fellers has come up.

I allus wondered jist how a coyote feels after he puts his foot in a trap, an' now I know. Here me, I am, while I'm doin' a neighbor a kindness, settin' on my horse with a steer out on the end o' my twine actin' like he's waitin' tuh be led home.

"There's the fellers!" says that old geezer real mean. "We caught 'em red-handed. Enough evidence tuh string 'em up a dozen times. On top o' bustin' into my hogpen an' maimin' one o' my hogs an' stealin' my chickens."

"Who yuh mangy crow-eaters talkin' tuh?" I says t' that. "No bunch of nesters what's been livin' off Hooker Bros. beef for years can't put no rope on our necks."

"Can't we?" says this here old nester, and the hard-lookin' bunch of men behind him they start surroundin' us. It looks like a showdown, an' it's up tuh me an' One-Ton tuh sell our lives as high as we kin.

JIST as we're preparin' to go fer our hawglegs tuh open up that battle, there's a interruption, which shore is dang lucky fer them nesters, as a pair o' hells-on-wheels like me an' One-Ton would o' ricked up their corpses all same as stove wood.

Two fellers gallops intuh the clearin', none other than Sheriff Andy Causey and his deputy, Lem Hanks.

"Keep them irons in leather!" Sheriff Andy bellers. "Fire a shot, and I'll clean up on both outfits. What's goin' on yere, anyway?"

"Cotched us some cow thiefs," says the nester. "As well as hog thiefs and chicken thiefs."

"I don't see no hogs nor chickens," says Andy, "but it shore does look like yuh got a pair o' cow rustlers. Kinda off yore range, ain't yuh, Johnny? Or is that yore steer and has the Hooker outfit gone in fer off-colors an' breakin' 'em tuh lead?"

"Yuh see, it's this way, Andy," I says, an' I explains 'bout the Widder Gushett's cows, but that blame Andy only takes another squint at the black steer, an' I know he don't believe a dang word o' it.

"What brand on the cows yuh huntin' fer?" he inquires, an' me an' One-Ton we got tuh admit we're huntin' jist for some cows with

notched ears, an' we don't know which ear.

Which don't sound so good.

"Nothin' fer it," says Andy, "but tuh take yuh in. Yuh cowboys got tuh be learnt tuh quit pesterin' these here pore nesters. C'mon, now! Mebbe yuh kin git out on bond until yore trial, an' mebbe yuh won't."

"But looky here," I argues, "me an' One-Ton was only helpin' out a neighbor. The Widder Gushett c'n tell yuh all about it."

"She c'n tell it to the judge," Andy says. "It don't sound reasonable—yuh fellers out lookin' fer milk cows an' havin' a big steer on the end o' yore rope. C'mon!"

THEY ain't no use argufyin' with Andy, so we takes the rope off the old steer an' heads off down country with that pair. Here's another o' them emergencies. I'm allus bein' called on tuh meet. I ain't worried about no trial, but if that ol' George cook o' ours an' my li'l coot brother Stevie learns about this, there won't be no livin' on the ranch with 'em.

So we keep beefin' tuh Andy about passin' the widder's place on the way tuh town till he says he'll do it if we'll only quit yappin'.

We don't say no more till we pull up at the widder's gate. She comes runnin' out an' busts right in talkin'.

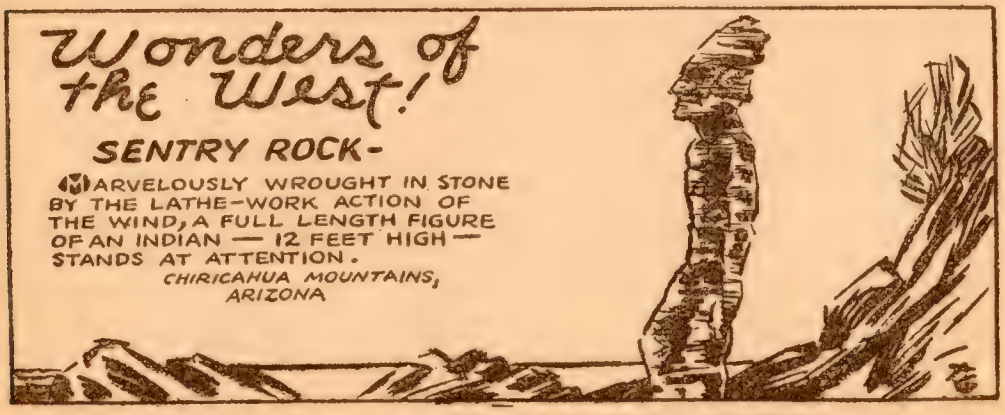
"Oh, Mr. Benson," she says, kind o' droppin' her eyes flirty when she looks at One-Ton, "you know them two milk cows of mine come walkin' right up tuh the gate jist a few minutes after yuh left t'other evenin'. I hope I didn't cause you and Mr. Hooker any trouble."

"Trouble!" booms Sheriff Andy Causey, an' he busts out in a laugh yuh c'd hear over in the next county. "I'll say they was headed fer plenty o' trouble, but that looks like pilin' it on too thick. Vamoose, yuh pair o' dumb saddle-pounders, an' stay offa nester range."

So that's how it is, an' them cows wasn't lost after all! An' jist account o' One-Ton persuadin' me t' go with him tuh hunt 'em, I near got shot an' hung.

This looks like another one of them emergencies I got tuh rise tuh meet. An' I shore does it. I takes down my rope an' I heads fer that big hunk o' trouble we calls One-Ton Benson, aimin' tuh wrop that hardtwist around his neck.

He's already off on a gallop, but I rises tuh that emergency also by spurrin' my bronc full speed after him. Me, Johnny Hooker, I'm good-natured, but even me, I got my limits, an' I guess even One-Ton knows that, fer it's a week 'fore he even shows up on the ranch ag'in.



Watch for More "Wonders of the West" in Coming Issues

Triangled Triggers

The barrel of a .45 crashed on his head as he turned his back to one of the willow clumps

"Yuh Shoot My Steer an' I'll Shoot Yore'n!"—And Then the Range Feud Flamed

By CLIFF WALTERS

Author of "Bogged Down," "Shorty Plays His Chips," etc.

BRAD MAYNARD was peeved as he splashed through Riffle Creek and headed for the cabin and corrals beyond. If his neighbor, old Lew Harrington, had returned the wire stretchers he'd borrowed, that strand of barbed wire wouldn't have had a chance to slip through the worn-out claws of a hammer—and at the same time take half the hide off the back of Brad's left hand.

But the young puncher wasn't the only one that was peeved; a fact he quickly observed as he neared Lew Harrington's corrals. His old neighbor was addressing a gaunt-faced youth who was saddling a horse.

"And don't show yore mug around this place no more!" he rasped. "Yuh've been here just a month. Which is just a month too long. Git yore junk together and ride. Ride plumb into the quicksands of hell for all I care! Yuh're nothing but a—"

The sound of clopping hoofs caused the irate speaker to turn and glare at the advancing Brad.

"What do yuh want?" he snapped, in a manner much unlike the usually calm Lew Harrington.

Any other time Brad Maynard might have grinned and overlooked his old neighbor's wrath. This time he didn't. He resented the other's sharp inquiry.

"I'd like to get my wire stretchers yuh borrowed over a month ago," he snapped back. "So I can fix the fence around my stack of wild hay—which that breachy roan steer of yores is always breakin' into."

"Ugh!" the old cowman grunted. "If yuh'd keep yore fences up, that roan steer wouldn't be walkin' through 'em."

"It it wasn't for that roan steer," countered steely-eyed Brad, "maybe I could keep my fences up. With all the grass there is on the range, that breachy mass of horns and hip bones has to bust into my saddle horse hay every time he trails in to the crick for water."

"There's your darn wire stretchers hangin' on that post there," Lew Harrington growled. "Take 'em home and keep 'em there. I'll buy some of my own."

"Good!" Brad clicked. Then, to the rusty-headed young man who had been at Harrington's place for a month: "I'll bet yuh're not sorry yuh're pullin' outta this place, cowboy."

"Tickled to death!" the other said, a grin on his gaunt face. "Ever since I've been ridin' for old Harrington, he's been warpathin' around and—"

"Get outta here—both of yuh!" Harrington boomed.

"I'm already gone," Brad answered. "Be sure yuh don't ship that roan steer this fall. I wouldn't know what to do with all my time if I wasn't buildin' fence on account of him."

He touched the spurs to his sorrel and headed up the creek again.

Brad Maynard did some relenting as he covered the two miles separating his little place from Lew Harrington's. This was the first time in the five years he had lived in Riffle Valley that he had quarreled with anyone. And especially with his closest neighbor—and closest friend—old Lew Harrington. He shook his head, smiled sheepishly, and decided to call on Lew again. Some time soon and when both of them were in a better frame of mind.

But as he neared his own little place, his anger flared again. There was that darn roan steer of Harrington's heading for the stack of wild hay. Brad emitted a yell, put the spurs to his sorrel and lit out after the breachy steer.

Nor did he abandon the chase until the gangling steer, puffing hard, was a good half mile away from the creek, and still running toward some scattered cattle on the open range. Swearing softly, the young cowman returned to his fence repairing.

BRAD was "gunny-sacking" a bay bronc in the corral that afternoon when old Lew Harrington, his leathery face slightly pale, rode up and glared over the top pole.

"Yuh still look kinda sore, Lew,"

the younger man ventured. "I was hopin' that yuh'd come up to say that we both acted like a coupla darn school kids this mornin'."

"Yeah, I'm still kinda sore." Harrington's voice was as chill as the expression in his blue eyes. "I just stopped by on my way home to tell yuh that I'm goin' to start packin' my gun. The first thing I'm goin' to shoot is one of yore three-year-old steers, Maynard! Kinda cancel yore killin' that roan steer of mine. If yuh still want to keep the game up after that, we'll start shootin at somethin' besides helpless cattle!"

"Say, are yuh plumb locoed today?" Brad countered evenly. "I run that roan steer of yore'n away from my place. But I didn't kill him."

"Yuh're a liar!" the other snapped, eyes blazing. "I found him dead, not more'n twenty minutes ago, layin' in a swale out there on the range. He's been shot. And yuh shot him."

"I guess that makes yuh the liar," Brad flared. "I've felt like killin' that pesky steer a dozen times. But so far, I haven't. And don't try killin' none of my stock, old hard-head, or there's goin' to be trouble brewin' on Riffle Crick."

"It's already brewed," Harrington snorted. "Yuh started it. See if yuh can finish it."

Then he was gone, spurring away downstream in the direction of home.

Brad scratched his head as he watched his hostile visitor round the first bend of the creek. Then he mounted his sorrel horse again and rode toward the place he had last seen Harrington's roan steer. At last he found the carcass lying, as his neighbor had said, in a grassy swale. Once more the young man scratched his head thoughtfully.

It was the sound of a shot, a distant report which sounded like it came from the bank of Riffle Creek, that roused Brad from his thoughts. There flashed into his mind the threat which Lew Harrington had made. He whirled away and loped straight for the willow-fringed stream.

Arriving there, he rode slowly among the thick willows where his and Harrington's cattle browsed along the shaded creek. Suddenly he swung from his saddle and walked over to where a fat steer—one of his own—lay motionless between two dense clumps of willows on the bank.

Brad's fists clenched.

"Why, the dirty old—"

He didn't finish what he had started to say about his neighbor. The barrel of a .45 crashed against his head as he turned his back to one of the willow clumps. A burst of stars swirled before his eyes, and, with a stifled groan, he slumped face down across the carcass of the dead steer.

IT seemed to Brad, when at last his eyes fluttered open again, that he had been reeling through dark spaces for an eternity. Yet the sun wasn't much farther to the west than—

Hoofs sounded on the nearby trail. Brad, dazed as he still was, remembered certain things. Enough so that he tried to clench his limp hands as he struggled up to a sitting position. A rider, the gaunt-faced youth he had seen at Harrington's place this morning, hove into sight and started to pass by.

"Hey!" Brad's call was more like a groan.

The passing rider turned in his saddle, finally saw the luckless Brad, and came spurring forward.

"What the heck's happened to yuh?" the newcomer wanted to know, as he hastened to Brad's side. "Did yore horse take a fall, or—"

"Nope. I took the fall," Brad explained weakly. He felt as if his

throbbing head were going to split wide open. "Would yuh dip my bandanna in the crick there and—"

"Sure!" The youth hastened to oblige. "Yore head looks like somebody busted a rock off'n it. Gosh, I'm sure glad I happened to come along. I'll help yuh git back home; then I'll try bandagin' that cut up the best I can."

Brad's benefactor said that his name was Roy Clark; that he had forgotten his gold watch when he left the Harrington place that morning and had gone back to get it.

"Meet anybody when yuh was comin' up the crick trail, Roy?" Brad inquired.

"Nope." The other shook his rusty-colored head slowly.

"Was Lew Harrington home when yuh went back to get yore watch?"

Again the youth's head shook.

"Didn't see him around nowheres. Say, yuh don't figger *he* was the one that busted yuh over the head, do yuh? Just on account of them few words yuh had this mornin'?"

"We had more'n a few words this afternoon," Brad explained bitterly. "What got into old Harrington all of a sudden? What happened that he fired yuh this mornin'?"

"Oh, it was mostly my fault, I guess," young Clark replied with a grin. "He wanted me to tack some shoes on that old black horse of his. I expect that old black's been shod forty times. But he wouldn't stand this mornin'. He jerked his hind foot away from me, skinnin' my leg up some, and I belted him in the ribs with the broad side of the shoein' hammer. Then old Lew grabbed the hammer outta my hand, and said he'd shoe him if I couldn't. The old black jerked his foot again, skinned Lew's leg—and I made the mistake of laughin' out loud. Then I got romped on proper—and fired."

"Sounds just like the old bullhead," Brad growled.

"Oh, I don't know," the other drawled. "I thought Lew Harrington was one of the finest fellers I've ever rode for. That is, till this mornin'. He kinda blowed up then. But I guess we all do that once in a while, don't we?"

Brad didn't reply to that. With his head paining him, and with thoughts of one of his fattest steers lying dead on the creek bank, he wasn't in a forgiving mood. A sinister frown had supplanted his customary expression. This morning he had been peeved. Now he was thoroughly riled.

"Better stop over with me tonight, Roy," he said to his companion. "There'll be plenty of time to head across the range lookin' for another job tomorrow."

"All right," the slim youth answered. "And here's hopin' I'll last longer on the next job than a month. Reckon a man might land one over in the Bird River country?"

"Yeah," Brad replied. "There's some big outfits over there. Try the Half Diamond Seven outfit. I used to ride for them myself. I'll give yuh a note to Bill Todd, the range foreman."

THE next morning Brad buckled on his six-shooter, slid a .30-30 carbine into his saddle scabbard, and bade good-by to young Clark who, after a hearty breakfast and equally hearty handshake, headed his roan horse for the Bird River country to the south.

There was a grim look on Brad's face as, keeping to the gulches as much as possible, he rode out to the nearby range where his and Lew Harrington's cattle grazed. Grey eyes alert, ears strained to catch any sound of shooting, he meant to know it if any more of his steers were killed. And if there were, a showdown, swift, sudden and disastrous to somebody, would be precipitated.

Brad had his guns today. He suspected that Lew Harrington would be carrying his, too.

At last, screened by a clump of cedars on a low knoll, Brad saw a rider coming across the range from the direction of Riffle Creek. It was Lew Harrington, and he was also sticking to the low places. Even at that distance, Brad could catch the glint of sunlight on the white-handled .45 swinging at his neighbor's hip.

Eyes narrowed, Brad watched the other rider angle up the side of a low ridge, and then drop out of sight as he apparently headed for Pocket Springs, that bowl-like cavity in the hills.

The puncher tensed in his saddle. He had seen a half dozen head of his cattle watering at Pocket Springs less than an hour ago. What would happen? Would Harrington—

The sound of two shots fired in rapid succession blasted Brad's speculations. Two shots emanating somewhere close to, if not in, Pocket Springs. Brad swore and put the spurs to his sorrel.

A short time later, still riding hard, he was angling up that same sidehill which Lew Harrington had taken, heading straight for Pocket Springs. He pulled his gun as he drew near the edge of that low, circling rim of ledgerock overlooking the waterhole.

A hasty glimpse over the rim revealed Lew Harrington standing beside a fallen cow critter. Brad slid from his saddle and ran forward.

"Reach for the air!" he yelled to the man below. "Yuh steer-killin'—"

But Harrington didn't reach for the air. He whipped out his gun, yelling curses as he did so, and sent a whining bullet whizzing close to Brad's body. Then Brad's gun started to crack—not at Harrington, but at a puff of white smoke which had betrayed the position of a third man crouched among the tall sagebrush on the rim to the south of Brad.

It was the hidden man's shot which, exposing his location, had sent Lew Harrington spinning to the ground down there. Now the fellow's whistling lead was showering around Brad—and Brad's was ripping into that high clump of sagebrush as fast as he could pull the trigger. Suddenly the third man's gun was silenced.

Brad took no chances, however, on the latter's playing possum. He reloaded his gun before he started to circle the rim. And then he kept as much protection between him and that clump of sagebrush as possible.

HIS caution was not necessary. When he reached the spot where lay the third man—that same gaunt-faced youth who had spent the night with him—he found young Clark holding both hands over his right hip.

"Don't do so much bellyachin'!" Brad commanded, while he covered the wounded man with his gun. "A bullet in the hip ain't going to kill anybody. It wouldn't stop anybody else from fightin'—tryin' to do what he started out to do—except a yellow whelp like yuh!" He kicked the other's gun out of reach, holstered his own .45. "Here. Let's see just how much damage that bullet of mine did do."

He was still examining the wound when old Lew Harrington, one hand pressed to his shoulder, appeared.

"So that's it?" the latter blurted. "It was that dirty skunk that plugged me—and come within one of endin' my days!"

"Yuh're right," Brad answered. "I know now who killed that roan steer of yore'n, Lew."

"And that steer of yore'n down by the crick. And that other one of mine just a while ago," the old cow-

man growled. "Well, them's lovin' relatives for yuh, Brad!"

"Relatives?" Brad asked, mouth slightly agape.

"Yep." Old Harrington nodded slowly. "I wasn't goin' to admit it to a livin' soul. But Roy Clark there's my only nephew."

"Gosh!" Brad blurted. "And here I thought the tricky coyote was just tryin to get even with yuh for firin' him."

"He didn't lose no job," Harrington explained. "He never had one with me. He come up here to sponge off'n me. He wouldn't work. All he talked about was when he was goin' to inherit my little spread. Nearly drove me batty. That's why I reared up at yuh like I did yesterday, I reckon, Brad."

"I see. He got too anxious to inherit yore little spread, I guess. That's why he wanted to see me get yore scalp. So things'd work out faster for him. Purty cute, he is, Lew. The way he busted me over the head with a gun yesterday, and then come 'happenin' along' in time to give me a lift had me fooled plenty."

Old Lew nodded reflectively.

"Yep. Purty cute. That's why they called him Fox Face Clark—back at the reform school which he just got out of." A grin came to the old cowman's leathery face. "But I'll bet yuh don't savvy yet why little Fox Face here was tryin' to kill us both off, and then make things look like we'd plugged each other."

"Why?" Brad asked

"'Cause," the other replied, "I finally got so sick and tired of him hintin' about inheritin' my spread that I up and told him the truth. Told him I'd already made a will leavin' it to somebody I really thought somethin' of—one Brad Maynard."

"Good gosh, Lew!" Brad blurted. "And only yesterday we was snappin' and snarlin' at each other like—"

"Forget yesterday," the old man said, extending a gnarled hand. "Yesterday don't count. Everything's goin' to be all right from now on—even little Fox Face here, who's goin' back where they'll keep him out of mischief." His grin broadened. "And that breachy roan steer won't never bother yore wild hay again, Brad."

ANSWERS TO QUESTIONS ON PAGE 66

1. Keno, chuck-a-luck, roulette, faro and poker.

2. 6,500.

3. Chief Joseph, 1832-1904, leader of the Nez Perces, was famous for his great military retreat towards Canada from Ohio, in 1877. The flight was an exodus of Joseph's whole people. Surrounded by 400 warriers to protect the aged, women, children, and the wounded bucks, he marched nearly 1,500 miles in 75 days. He fought and won four battles against the American troops during this time—but he finally surrendered to General Miles.

4. Captain Leander H. McNelly, famous soldier and adventurer and head of a company of Rangers, carried on a persistent and effective campaign against Juan Cortina and other notorious cattle thieves.

5. Robert Hoslem (Pony Bob) famous Pony Mail Service rider of the '80s, made a continuous record ride of 380 miles. The usual length of a ride for the galloping expressmen was 75 miles before a rest was taken. Three horses were used in making the average trip.

Murder Ranch

He pulled the trigger again and again

Dan McKay Had a Hunch That He'd Be the Next Victim of the Mysterious Killer Who Was Haunting the Buckshot Spread—So He Got Busy!

By WILLIAM E. POINDEXTER

Author of "Seven Sons of Satan," "Tickets to Hell," etc.

FEAR settled down over the Buckshot Ranch like a smothering blanket.

Men who could meet death in the open with a grin of derision, now rode cautiously, heads over shoulders and hands hovering nervously over gun butts. Even drawn blinds

and locked doors were no assurance of safety against the mysterious murder menace that stalked abroad on the range.

Dan McKay, foreman of the Buckshot, crouched on his heels by the bunkhouse, his back flat against the wall. His thin, dark face was drawn and moody as he dragged at a cigarette, and his slitted eyes moved ceaselessly from left to right.

A MAN stepped silently around the corner of the bunkhouse, and guns flashed in draws too swift for the eye to follow. There was a second of strained silence, then both men laughed shamefacedly, and thrust the guns back into their holsters.

"Hell, mister!" McKay drawled, "yuh want to yell real loud before yuh get within gun range. I'm so plumb nervous I'll be takin' pot shots at my shadder before long."

John Harker, half owner of the Buckshot, groaned and sank down beside his foreman. He was well past middle age, and the muscles which had padded his big form were giving place to sagging fat. He mopped his perspiring face and groaned again.

"Three killin's in three days," he said dismally. "Gawd! Wonder who's next?"

"Dunno." McKay shook his head helplessly. "Me, I'm plumb stampeded off the range. When yuh can't figger out how or why murder has been committed, let alone who done it, yuh're up a tree. Harker, le's go over the thing again an' see if we can't find a startin' place. Hell, by the time Miss Hollis comes to take her share of the ranch over, there won't be enough men left above ground to ride herd on one lil dogie."

John Harker nodded. A month before, his partner, Ben Adrian, had been fatally injured in a fall from his horse. On his death-bed he had belatedly remembered that he had one living relative, a niece whom he had not seen in years.

At the last minute he had insisted on writing out a will, leaving his share of the ranch to the niece. She had been located in Denver, and had announced her intention of visiting the Buckshot. Although she was overdue, nothing more had been heard from her.

"Four days ago," said Dan McKay carefully, as if he had not rehearsed the thing a hundred times in those four days, "we found Shorty Davis back of the little corral with a hole in his back big enough to drive a trail herd through. Shot with a shotgun at close range, but not close enough to leave powder burns. Half a dozen of us heard the shot, an' he was still kickin' when you an' me got there. Not a stranger around any place, not a shotgun, so far as we can find, on the ranch."

Harker shook his head despairingly. "Couldn't have shot himself, I reckon," he suggested feebly.

"An' then went out an' hid the gun somewhere?" Dan said with mild sarcasm. "Now why wasn't I bright enough to think of that myself?"

"Well, hell," snorted Harker testily, "it's about as reasonable as him bein' shot without nobody around to shoot him. An' Red Willis was killed the same way. Say, yuh don't reckon anybody could be shootin' from the top of the hogback over yonder, do yuh?"

Dan grunted disgustedly. "Even if a shotgun would carry that far, which it wouldn't, it would scatter to hell an' gone. Everyone of these men was killed from a distance of a few feet."

"I know," Harker sighed. "But it's all so damned unreasonable that it makes most anything look possible. An' then Curtis was killed the same way, but he was alone in the bunkhouse when it happened, an' I was

within sight of the door. Yuh remember you got there a few seconds after I did. Nobody came outa that bunkhouse.

"We both know that. But there was Curtis layin' on the floor with his heart blowed out. There was no place for anybody to hide, an' the land is so flat an' open around here that it would take even a jackrabbit five minutes to git outa sight."

"Oh Lordy!" Dan McKay groaned. "We're gittin' nowhere in a hurry. If we could just figger out why anybody would try to massacree the whole outfit, we might make a start."

"The Buckshot ain't got an enemy," Harker said ruminatively, "unless — well, yuh remember that Swede that's runnin' sheep on the mesa over beyond Balde Butte? We had to haze him off the range a time or two, I recollect."

"Yeah," McKay admitted, "he's pizen, all right, but he ain't had no chance to pull anything like this. I thought of him; thought maybe he might have a man workin' here for him. But Harker, all our boys was here before we ever heard of the Swede. An' I'd gamble my soul not one of 'em would sell out to a lamb licker.

"It ain't reasonable, John. They wouldn't do it in the first place, an' they wouldn't have time to do it an' get rid of the shotgun in the second. Besides, you an' me knows nobody came outa that bunkhouse where Curtis was shot, an' yet there wasn't anybody in there. I think we all been eatin' loco weed. It's that crazy."

Harker got to his feet, looking cautiously around before starting away.

"Well, it can't last much longer. Me, I'm goin' to lock myself up an' take a nap. I ain't as young as I was, an' I set up most uh the night watchin' the winders. I got a hunch I'm next in line for a dose of lead, but I certainly aim to play it good and safe."

He laughed shortly and strode toward the ranchhouse. Dan McKay sat frowning for a moment, then flicked his cigarette away and rose lithely to his feet. He went to the stable, peered in first, swore at himself, and went in to saddle the pinto in one of the stalls. He had just mounted when another puncher rode up.

"See anythin' Johnny?" McKay called.

Johnny shook his head. "Not even a sidewinder," he said. "I rode around—"

He broke off sharply as a muffled report came from the ranchhouse. Before it had died away, Dan was off his horse and running awkwardly toward the house. As his high heels clattered on the porch, he drew his gun, and his eyes were dark with dread of what he might find. Finger tensing on the trigger, he crashed open the door of Harker's room, then let his breath go in a grunt of relief.

WITH the sweat pouring from his face, Harker was leaning against the wall, staring at the half open window. Just above his head the wall was heavily peppered with buckshot.

"The shot came from the winder!" he gasped.

"See who it was?" Dan snapped.

"No, I—"

But Dan was already gone. He ran around the house. There was no one in sight, but he was just in time to see a figure disappear into the cook shack which was set a little apart from the house. He leaped in pursuit and as he crashed through the door, the cook squawked and tried to hide behind his dishpan. He gurgled with relief when he saw that his pursuer was McKay.

"Yuh hear that shot, Baldy?" Dan rasped.

Baldy stared at the foreman reproachfully. "Did I? Yuh don't think I was doin' that high dive into my hole just for exercise, do yuh? At my age?"

"Then yuh was outside an' in full view of the Old Man's winder," Dan caught him up swiftly. "Who was it, Baldy? Did yuh manage tuh recognize him?"

The cook stared and fumbled at his dirty apron. "Recognize him? There wasn't nobody to recognize, Dan! Nobody atall. An' I didn't wait to investigate none."

DAN sprang at him, his eyes blazing, and caught him by the shoulder. "Yuh lie, Baldy!" he thundered. "That shot was fired through the winder an' yuh was in plain sight. Then if there wasn't nobody there, yuh—"

He suddenly hurled the cook aside and leaped into the back room where Baldy had his living quarters. The search did not take him long, and when he came out he was certain that no shotgun was hidden there. But there was an odd, tense look on his dark face.

He met Johnny and Harker at the door, and pushed them back.

"John," he said harshly, "yuh go back to your room, lock the door an' keep outa line of that winder. I got a notion somethin' is due to break before long. Johnny, yuh hightail it to town—no, better send the Kid, I may need yuh—an' have him tell the station agent to keep Miss Hollis in town if she comes. Tell him to get the mail an' see if the sheriff is back yet."

Harker seemed shaken with fear, and he obeyed his foreman's orders as if he had been a child. Dan carefully examined the ground outside the window, but it was packed hard as stone and there were no recognizable marks. He thrust his head through the half open window, and sniffed.

WHEN Johnny returned, the two men searched the ranch buildings and corrals, but with the result they had come to expect—nothing.

"What do yuh make of this, Johnny?" Dan said abruptly. "Baldy says he was outside the cook shack, an' that ain't forty feet from the winder. But he says he didn't see nobody. If that's reasonable, then two an' two don't make four, an' I'm a long-eared jassack."

"Well, nobody never does see nobody," Johnny said dolefully, then stiffened. "Say, yuh don't mean that old Baldy may be the one that did it? Why, gosh, Dan, he's been here since Methuselum wore knee pants an—"

"I know," Dan muttered, "but I suspect everybody these days. I suspect you, Johnny. I even suspect myself. I wouldn't be none surprised if my pinto hoss here was to drag a shotgun from under his vest an' start shootin'. But Baldy musta saw somebody, or else he done it himself. But what could he do with the gun?"

He laughed shortly and without mirth. "Johnny, yuh start circulatin' around. Keep yore eyes open an' don't let nobody come up behind yuh. I got somethin' that slightly resembles a idea buzzin' around in what has been miscalled my brain, an' I got to see can I put my brand on the critter."

As Johnny straddled away, Dan McKay went to the corral and perched on the top rail in a position where he could keep an eye on the cook shack. His brow was furrowed with thought as he absently built a cigarette.

"They's somethin' I've missed," he muttered to himself. "Somethin'

that's right before my eyes, an' been there all the time, too. I'd gamble on it. But what it is—"

He broke off and the cigarette slowly crumpled between his brown fingers.

"Shorty first, then it's Red, an' then Curtis. Hell! That's it! Then the old man, an' I'm next. Mebbe not, though."

HE was watching the cook house closely. Two or three times Baldy had looked through the door or window, only to draw back hastily when he found Dan's eyes fixed balefully upon him.

In sudden decision, Dan leaped down from the corral. "Well, there's one way to make sure," he muttered. "If I'm gonna get a handful of buckshot in my hump I might as well do it now an' get it over with."

Catching sight of Johnny, he waved to him, and the two men walked in the direction of the cook house. Stopping a few feet away, Dan turned and caught Johnny by the arm.

"I know who the killer is, Johnny," he said with an appearance of caution, but making sure that his voice carried clearly. "I've read his brand, but I'm not goin' to start anything till the sheriff gets here. He ought to be back from Phoenix by this time, an' the Kid will have him out here by night. No, I can't tell yuh who it is now. Maybe yuh better ride into town, Johnny, an' see can yuh hurry him up a little—"

Still talking, they drifted away from the kitchen in the direction of the corrals, and Dan immediately lowered his voice to a cautious whisper.

"Johnny," he said swiftly, "I was just bluffin'. I don't know anything yet—nothin' I can prove—but I got a prime lot of suspicions. An' yuh ain't goin' to town, neither. I got a idea I'm overdue for some lead poisonin' an' I might as well hurry it up a little."

"Mebbe yuh know what you're talkin' about," Johnny said patiently, "but yuh certainly sound plumb locoed to me. Would yuh mind elucidatin' some?"

"Just this, Johnny—if the killer thinks I'm on to him, an' that I'll spill the beans when the sheriff gets here, then he'll try to kill me before I can talk, to save his skin. That's logic. Well, I think he intends to kill me anyhow, an' I'm givin' him the chance.

"Now, I'm goin' down to them cottonwoods an' pretend to be workin' on that rawhide rope I'm braidin'. If anybody wants to get me, he can crawl up the gulch from either direction an' ambush me."

"But Dan," Johnny protested anxiously, "that's askin' for it. It's suicide!"

"My gun hand ain't crippled none," Dan said grimly. "But that ain't all. I want to make out that I'm not watchin', so yuh'll head for town, but circle around an' come up to the top of the hogback over yonder. Don't let anybody see yuh. I'll be watchin', an' if yuh see anybody—anybody atall, mind yuh—comin' this way, wave yore hat onct. Get it?"

Johnny nodded dubiously. "But if he gets yuh—"

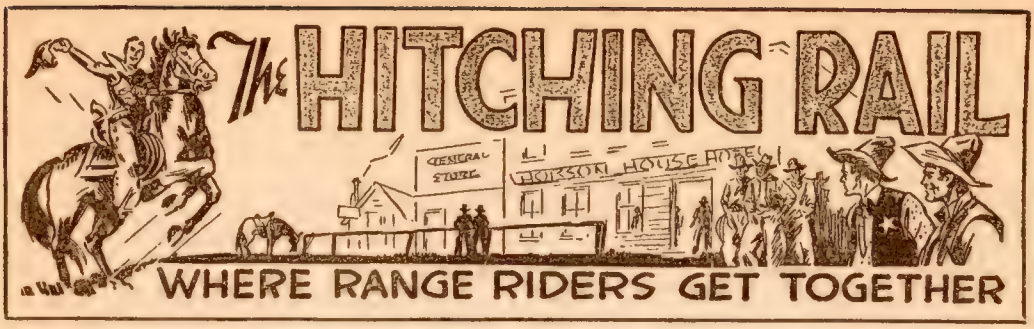
"If he gets me," Dan said decisively, "then yuh'll see who done it, an' yuh'll come a-shootin'."

A few minutes later he watched Johnny ride away and lope down the trail in the direction of town. Then he procured his rawhide, and strolled casually past the kitchen. Baldy peered out at him from the door, his drooping moustache working.

"Think yuh'll ketch the killer, Dan?" the cook queried.

For an instant Dan's eyes burned into his. "Naw," he drawled at last.

(Continued on page 123)



COMO la Va, amigos? Another month an' yere we all are ag'in, squattin' 'longside our HITCHIN' RAIL an' jugglin' words an' happenin's since last time. Betcha yuh all been findin' th' stories in this yere issue best uv all, too. Cain't be no better'n th' featured one this time, RANGER BULLETS, by that durned old cow-waddy, A. LESLIE. When a fella kin write a yarn like that one, yuh kin put it down in yore hat that he's been places an' seen things an' done a heap o' range ridin'. But so's all th' others in this yere number. Ain't no man gits inside these covers 'less'n he's throwed down his ol' soogan beside many a chuck-waggin an' downed a heap o' frijoles an' mulligan.

An' ef yuh read, as you oughta, our August issue, tellin' all 'bout th' visit we had from them rannihans from th' real-an'-only West, then yuh won't be surprised when I tells yuh them *hombres* has been right responsive tuh all th' boss yere did fer 'em durin' their stay.

'Long Comes a Pinto

First, 'long comes a swell, trained pinto hoss fer th' boss himself—fifteen hands high, thousand pounds o' hard flesh, an' purtier 'n yuh ever did see outside a cirkus.

Th' boss, he drops all his worried look over MSS stackin' high on his desk, grabs his hat, slings a laig over that bronc an' goes rompin' straight fer Central Park an' them bridle paths, what folks back yere calls them narrow dirt roads what no automobile is allowed tuh use. Makes things safer, all around. Boss come back achucklin' like a kid, face flushed like uh bunch o' Arizony winds had busted 'crost his face, makin' 'im look like a million dollars *oro*. An' was he slappin' his ridin' boots with his quirt? Made me so durned homesick I jerked down my ol' chaps hangin' yere on th' wall, shoved 'em on an' does a cowboy shuffle, all hands around, Miss Blondie leadin' th' way.

They Didn't Forget Blondie

An' them boys didn't fergit *her*, neither. Not on yore life, folks, no *suh*. They sent her one o' th' purtiest palominas I ever seen after forty year on th' range. Th' hoss was 'bout th' size o' th' boss's pinto, but it danced up an' down like it was plumb tickled tuh death when Miss Blondie got up intuh her saddle an' lifted her reins. That gal's allers surprisin' me a heap, folks.

An' she shore surprised me that time, fer she sat that hoss like she was borned in a saddle, held 'er reins loose, cowboy style, an' jest went around them bridle paths an' over a bunch o' jumps like she was wearin' spangles an' doin' cirkus stuff. Me, I sat on a bench an' cussed th' world—me bein' in my new high-heeled boots straight from El Paso an' no durned hoss tuh straddle.

A Horned Toad fer Me

But I got even, right *pronto* with both th' boss an' Miss Blondie, fer th' boys had sent me one o' them horned toads 'bout four inches long (done up in a wooden box a foot square an' makin' me think I was gittin' a grand present). But when th' boss comes stridin' in with that quirt abangin' ag'in his dusty boots an' Miss Blondie came walkin' in in her ridin' clothes—(ain't none never cut no better'n hers, folks), I'd shoved that durned horned toad in her desk drawer—th' one where she allers keeps her sharpened pencils an' would open first, from long habit.

Next thing I knowed, her an' th' boss was standin' on top o' his desk an' both ayellin' at me tuh git th' durned horned toad back in th' box. But did I? No, *suh!* Revenge is sweet, sayeth . . . somebody or other. I jest straddles my own chair an' pokes a broom at Mister Horned Toad an' makes 'im romp all over th' whole durned place. That's one time I stopped all th' work back yere, ef I never do it ag'in.

Namin' th' Toad

But finally they sorta got likin' that horned toad an' so we holds a closed meetin' tuh select 'im a fittin' name an' make 'im a official part o' our workin' force. We've christened that toad *hombre* "Western Thriller," an' they's a reason. Mebbe some uv yuh ain't knowin' it, but they's a new book out an' on sale all over th' country — called WESTERN THRILLERS and packed with hand-selected Western stories what's been choosed as th' best from THRILLING WESTERN, THRILLING RANCH STORIES and POPULAR WESTERN.

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(Continued on page 120)

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(Continued from page 118)

horned toad Western Thriller, an' now Thriller shore has th' run o' th' office, lookin' up at ev'rybody like he was tryin' tuh find someone tuh tell him where's his ol' desert. I shore knows that achin' feelin', an' me an' him, now an' then, jest sits an' looks at each other, soulful like.

Answers tuh Letters

Well, I gotta answer some o' these swell letters. First one's from Frank Talmadge, out Reno way. Looks sorta bad, Frank—Reno. What's th' trouble? Couldn't you an' th' wife git on level ground an' find more joy in hugs than in scratchin' out eyes?

Better git back together, son, afore it's too late. Th' pie yuh've sent me, tuh show why you cain't live with 'er no more, was shore fine. Me an' Thriller et ev'ry scrap uv it, *pronto.*

So yuh wants tuh know what's meant by "Tail tyin'," son. Well, it's jest thisaway, Frank. When you've got yore steer throwed with yore rope an' held there by yore trained bronc, yuh takes th' steer's tail, divides th' hairy part at its end intuh two parts an' ties th' ends together, makin' a sorta loop. Then twist th' tail 'round th' steer's upper hind laig an' bring th' end o' th' loop between th' steer's cloven foot. This holds th' laig up an' th' steer cain't rise.

Tail tyin' ain't used much, 'less a fella runs outa hoggin' strings (short ropes 'bout two-an'-a-half feet long). When usin' th' usual hoggin' rope, yuh ties *both* hind laigs together, at th' ankles; an' most times a cowman ties th' two *front* ankles an' th' upper rear ankle in one bunch, which is done quick and easy an' th' regulation way, specially at rodeos an' sech.

Tyin' and Twistin'

Don't git "Tail tyin'" mixed with "Tail twistin'," Frank. They're diff'rent, a heap. Tail twistin's mostly practiced down in Old Mexico, an' it's done thisaway. Fella mounts his bronc an' rides 'longside his steer, usually on th' left rear o' th' steer, both goin' at a run, clost together. Rider reaches down with his right hand, grabs th' steer's tail, then swings his own right laig over th' tail, holds tight and spurs his bronc fast, ridin' right by th' steer an' jest a little tuh th' left front, still hangin' ontuh th' steer's tail under his own right laig. Th' speed an' weight o' th' bronc overbalances th' steer, what usually turns a somersault. As th' steer tumbles, th' rider lets loose o' th' tail an' rides off. It's jest a fancy, dare-devil stunt, without no range value.

Center Fire Saddles

Now comes Tom Hall o' Sacramento, Californy. Right good looker, Tom, with all that fancy Injun costume yuh show in

(Continued on page 122)

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(Continued from page 120)

yore picture; an' yore bronc's a real good looker. Grey, eh? Fine!

I usta ride a grey an' he shore carried me strong. Tom asks what's a "center fire" saddle.

That type come first from out yore way, son—Californy bein' 'most first tuh use 'em. Instead o' double cinchas, one front an' one in rear, th' center fire saddles has their cinchas plumb center an' only use th' one. Lotsa them used up Washington an' Oregon way, still. Some cowmen prefers 'em. Others says they're apt tuh slide over sideways when roping steers an' send th' rider off intuh th' dust. It's jest a matter o' taste, Tom, which one a fella prefers an' is used tuh. I've used 'em a heap an' never had my saddle turn yit. Take a look in some good saddle shop, son, an' study each kind, then make yore choice, an' yuh won't be much wrong, either way.

Lariat Lengths

Next letter's from Dick Wales, who hails from th' balmy land o' Louisiana. Sorta makes me feel "Huey," readin' o' yore State these days, Dick. Thanks fer yore picture. Yore hoss is shore lookin' well-kept—an' a dark brown, kind what don't tire yuh out in brushin' an' curryin'. Dick's askin' how long does cowboys use their lariats — what we cow-folks usually calls "ropes." Well, Dick, all depends. Usual length runs between thirty an' forty feet.

They ain't jest plain, ordinary rope like yuh buys fer a clothesline or tuh rope bedrolls with, though. Them sort cuts a fella's palms like thorns. Best kind is silk-fibered rope. Smooth tuh th' hands when th' drag comes, an' not apt tuh git twists in it. They's some cowboys what uses ropes seventy-five feet long, but yuh shore gotta be expert an' then some tuh toss a rope what's that length. But real experts'll make yore eyes dazzle, with them long ones. Me, I allers uses thirty-five foot rope, like most uv us does down 'round my country—what's Arizony.

Th' Pistol Twirl

Tad Lewis, a six-footer from Arkansas, writes in askin' what's meant by th' "Pistol twirl." Son, yuh must be practicin' fer real show-downs; an' yuh better keep practicin' a lot ef yuh aims makin' that pistol twirl play ag'in a good six-gunner. It's done this away, Tad.

Hold yore six-gun in yore hand, butt pointin' tuh th' front, like yuh was handin' it tuh a deppity who's got a durned cold eye an' one hand on his own gun. Keep yore trigger finger inside yore trigger guard an' sorta loose. Then, suddenly, make yore gun turn a somersault around yore trigger finger, like a flash o' streaked lightnin'. At th' end o' th' twirl, th' muzzle's aimin' straight at yore enemy an' yore hand is grippin' yore butt tight an' firm, ready tuh blaze quick.

We cowmen figger that th' famous Wess

(Continued on page 128)

MURDER RANCH

(Continued from page 117)

"I'm gonna forget about it till the sheriff comes."

He swung about and strolled towards the cottonwoods, making certain that anyone watching could see his direction. Reaching them, he sat down cross-legged in the shade, the rawhide across his knees. A brush filled gulch ran up on either side, and it was the perfect spot for an ambush if one were not suspecting it.

From that point he could not see the ranchhouse, but he knew it would be in plain sight of Johnny.

HE eased the gun in its holster, making certain that it was ready for a lightning draw. If what he expected happened, if the killer slipped up on him with the intention of shooting him and thus stopping him from talking, the loss of a split second would mean certain death.

There was the chance, also, that the killer might pot him with a rifle from a distance, but the mysterious shotgun had been used so successfully that he believed it would be tried again.

He scanned the skyline over the hogback carefully, and nodded with relief as he saw a slight movement close to a boulder. Johnny was on the job.

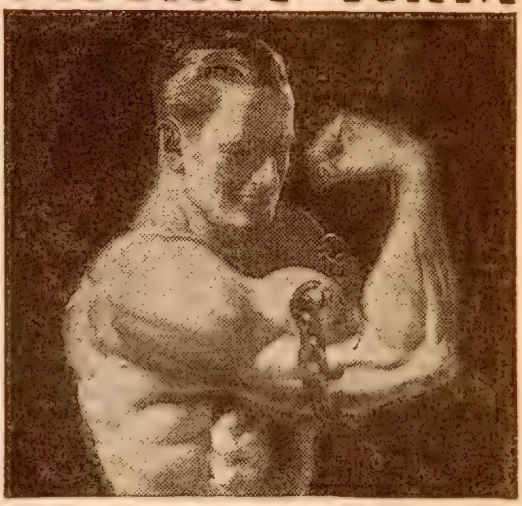
Dan whistled softly to himself, his fingers braiding busily, but his eyes shifted from left to right, and he watched closely for any signal from Johnny. An hour dragged slowly by without interruption—the longest hour that Dan had ever known. Perhaps he had been utterly wrong, and his ruse would not work.

Or perhaps the killer had slipped into the gulch without Johnny seeing him, and was even at that moment creeping up through the underbrush, murderous weapon in hand.

Although his nerves were as near

(Continued on page 124)

MOULDING A MIGHTY ARM



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(Continued from page 123)

steel as it is possible for human nerves to be, nevertheless he could feel a cold, prickling sensation at the back of his neck, and his pulse began to hammer with unnatural force. His fingers twitched for the butt of his gun, only inches away, but by an effort of will he continued working on the rope.

To meet death in the open was one thing. To feel that it might be creeping up behind you, that even now a finger might be tensing on the trigger, was something else again. Dan found himself wondering if, when the charge of shot tore into his heart, he would die without realizing what had happened.

He swore swiftly to himself as beads of sweat broke out on his forehead, then he stiffened. Johnny's hat had lifted slowly in the agreed upon signal. Instantly the nervous tension was gone. With the prospect of action near, Dan was alert, ready for whatever might happen.

He was listening intently for any sound that might denote someone creeping up through the gulch, and his long, steady fingers were slightly hooked, ready to answer lead with lead.

FIFTEEN minutes passed, but time meant nothing to Dan now. There was the feel of death in the still air, but whether his own death or another's he could not know. Although his head did not move, his eyes still shuttled back and forth, missing nothing.

But he was watching the gulch for any movement in the brush, and he started slightly when he caught a movement among the cottonwood trees.

Dan was distinctly puzzled. Why should the killer come face to face with him through the trees, where Dan could hardly fail to spot him, when the logical approach was the

concealing gulch? He forgot that, however, realizing that the man might shoot with a rifle or six-gun from behind a tree. Bending forward alertly, fingers an inch from his gun, he watched closely, and again saw a movement, this time a little closer.

"Hell, get it over with!" he muttered wrathfully beneath his breath.

Then, as he watched, he saw a bald head slowly rising from the bushes, and his face twisted into bitter lines that were half rage and half grief. So old Baldy was creeping up like a snake to murder him, then!

Baldy was a sort of landmark on the range, and Dan had known him nearly all his life. It was he who had prevailed upon the owners of the Buckshot to give the old man a job as cook after a fall from his horse had rendered him incapable of riding.

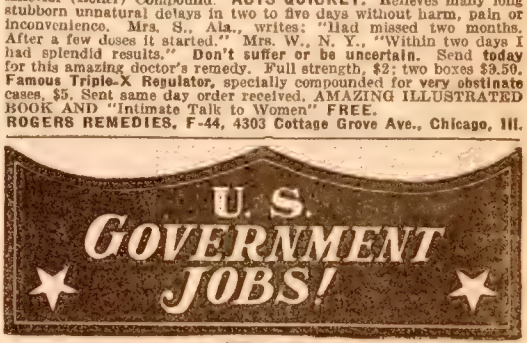
"God, Baldy," he muttered, "I couldn't have believed it. A triple murderer, an' lookin' for a fourth! But why? What's he got against me? I reckon this stampedes my ideas plumb off the range, but—"

He could see that Baldy had not located him yet, but the old man's eyes were peering nearsightedly about. Dan could have shot him at any moment, but he hesitated. The man was a cold-blooded murderer, more dangerous than a rattler, but he had been fond of Baldy, and he hesitated to believe the evidence of his own eyes.

At that instant Baldy saw him, and his bald head ducked ludicrously into the bushes. Expecting a shot, Dan's hand darted to his holster, and in the same instant something rustled faintly in the gulch behind him.

It might have been a cottontail, or a bird in the bushes. Why he did it, he never knew, but perhaps it was because, in his innermost consciousness, he did not really believe that

(Continued on page 126)



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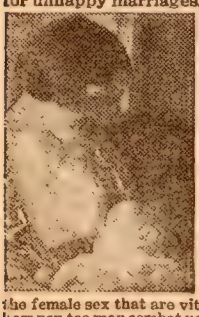

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(Continued from page 125)

Baldy was the killer after all. At any rate, even as the rustle sounded, Dan jerked out his gun and flung himself desperately to one side.

Even as he did so a gun roared thunderously within feet of him, and something that felt like the claws of a wild animal raked across his back. He continued the roll to bring his gun hand uppermost, and saw a huge bulk almost towering over him.

He squeezed the trigger and two reports blended in one deadly reverberation. Buckshot sprayed his shoulder without doing much damage, and he pulled the trigger again and again.

The huge bulk of the man who had sought a fourth victim, fell forward almost on top of him, and lay still.

Dan took one look and turned away, his face white and sick. He was conscious that Baldy had rushed up and was babbling excitedly, but he paid no attention. He was still standing there with the gun dangling from his fingers when Johnny galloped up and flung himself from his horse.

OTHER men were running toward the cottonwoods and the Kid had just returned from town. Dan was scarcely conscious that a letter had been thrust into his hands, although he was staring blindly at it.

"Dan," Johnny cried hoarsely, "it's Harker! Yuh've killed the old man!"

Dan nodded somberly. "God!" he said bitterly, "what some men will do for money! And there's the 'shotgun'. No wonder we couldn't locate it."

From the leaves he kicked a double-barreled derringer so small that it could be hidden in the palm of the hand, but the calibre was sufficiently large to carry a shotgun shell. A murderous weapon at short range.

"But, Dan," Johnny demanded,

"how did yuh know it was him? An' why did he do it?"

Dan turned the letter over in his hands. "Well, I wasn't certain," he confessed, "and then Baldy, the old buzzard, messed things up worse than ever. But when I got to thinkin' things over, it seemed funny to me that whenever a man was killed, John Harker was always the first to reach him.

"When Curtis was killed in the bunkhouse, Harker was just goin' in the door when I got there. Or that's what I thought. It's easy enough to see now that he shot Curtis, jumped out the door, then started back in again just as I got there. It made a pretty alibi, yuh see.

"Then just to make sure nobody would suspect him, he fired a shot into the wall of his room, and said it come through the winder. That's where he overplayed his hand, but it took me some time to see it. But Baldy was in sight of that winder an' he said nobody was there. The possibility was that maybe Baldy had fired the shot himself.

"I didn't really believe it, but I had to take that into consideration. However, I realized later that Harker's room had been filled with smoke, which wouldn't have happened if the shot had been fired from outside the winder as he said."

He paused and fixed his eyes sternly on Baldy. "That pretty well proved things to me, but Baldy had to go prowling around through the trees, an' mighty near got his head blowed off, besides what happened to me."

Baldy grinned. "I knowed yuh suspected me, Dan," he said, "so I thought I'd try to find the killer myself before yuh started crawlin' my hump."

Dan nodded. "Well, Johnny, when I was talkin' to yuh by the cook house, I talked loud enough so's both

(Concluded on page 129)

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THE HITCHING RAIL

(Continued from page 122)

Hardin war 'bout th' most expert fella what ever used that trick—which he did a lot o' times, an' allers won out with it. But it's so durned well known now that a fella what tries it is plumb apt tuh find hisself salivated afore he kin blink. Still, it's got its own place in th' hall o' gun-fame, an' right wise tuh know how tuh do it.

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novelette, by Syl MacDowell. But yo're gonna cotton tuh every yarn in th' October number, fellas an' gals, or I miss my bet—which jest cain't happen, nohow. They'll be yarns by Tom Gunn, James W. Egan, Cliff Walters, an' other pokes.

Adios amigos! Better be gittin' yore winter clothes freshened up soon. Them ol' snow-flakes ain't much farther ahaid now, come November. *Hasta luega, companeros!* Be seein' yuh!

Buck Benson

MURDER RANCH

(Concluded from page 127)

Baldy an' the old man would hear me. It had to be one of the two, but I didn't count on both of 'em prowlin' about down here. I was watchin' Baldy, an' Harker near got me."

"But why, Dan?" Johnny persisted.

"The way I've got it figgered out, he wanted Ben Adrian's half of the ranch. It's easy to see that now. When Adrian made the will, he had Shorty, Red, Curtis an' me witness it. Maybe he was suspicious of Harker.

"Anyway, if Harker could get rid of the four witnesses, then he could destroy that will an' forge another, leavin' the ranch to himself. Miss Hollis herself couldn't prove anything. But he couldn't get away with it as long as any of the witnesses was alive. He mighty near succeeded."

DAN tore the letter open, glanced at it indifferently, then laughed.

"It's from some lawyers in Denver," he said, "sayin' that Adrian's niece, Miss Hollis, was killed last week in a train wreck. As Adrian had no other kin, and neither had Miss Hollis, Adrian's share of the ranch naturally reverts to his partner.

"Hell, Johnny, old man Harker murdered three men an' lost his own life tryin' to gain possession of a ranch that he'd already owned for a week!"

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30x5.25-20	2.95	1.15
31x5.25-21	3.25	1.15
28x5.50-18	3.35	1.15
29x5.50-19	3.35	1.15
30x6.00-18	3.40	1.15
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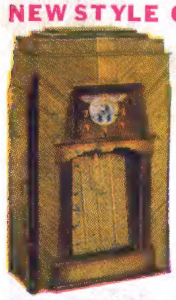

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